

## Vision of Earth Community

Fritz and Vivienne Hull

When we first met Thomas, almost thirty years ago, we didn't know who he was. We had just founded the Chinook Learning Center (now known as the Whidbey Institute) on Whidbey Island in the U.S. Northwest. Our vision was to create a retreat center where people from all traditions could be "at home," a place where we could explore together a new spiritual and religious understanding of the growing environmental crisis and imagine a new future for ourselves and those coming after us. We were full of enthusiasm, though with a bit of naiveté about what it would take. Chinook grew and in time became a major center in the Northwest for "Earth, Spirit and the Human Future." In those early years a colleague on our staff heard of Thomas and said we must bring him here.

As we escorted Thomas from the plane he said, "A new vision is entering the world." This wouldn't be the only time that the first thing Thomas says when you are with him is astonishing, inspiring, outrageous, and you know right away that it is true. We knew we were in the presence of a truly great man.

Thomas spent several days with us in the old Farmhouse built by immigrants from Finland at the beginning of the 20th century, a family who settled the land with a hope-filled vision for a better life. Friends crowded in, sat on the floor, and listened to Thomas telling us that we all must be pioneers on behalf of an emerging, hopeful, and Earth-honoring vision for the 21st century. He insisted that humankind must comprehend the profound extent to which we have brought devastation to the Earth community and altered the major life systems of the planet. We must be responsible for the damage we are doing to our magnificent planet and all the creatures with whom we share this beautiful home. We must work for the healing of the Earth and the restoration of mutually enhancing Earth/Human relations.

He said there's a new story to be told. It's the story of the Earth as Sacred Community. The universe, Thomas said, over and over again, is not a "collection of objects, but a communion of subjects." We live, he said, in a "universe of wonder."

He went on to say and later wrote:

The nobility of our lives depends upon the manner in which we come to understand our assigned role. We must feel that we are supported by that same power that brought the Earth into being, that power that spun the galaxies into space, that lit the sun and brought the moon into its orbit...We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation...The human

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venture depends absolutely on a quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth.

No one we knew had ever said or written anything like this before. His vision for “Earth, Spirit and the Human Future” and his great love for the children became our guiding light. In 1999 we built a beautiful hall on the Chinook land and dedicated it in honor of Thomas. Through the years since, hundreds and hundreds of people have come for programs, events, and celebrations to the Thomas Berry Hall. Many know his work. Others ask who Thomas Berry is, and we have the privilege of introducing them to the great work of this great man.

We have beautiful images of Thomas in our memories. Once we found him walking down the highway on Whidbey Island from the Chinook Center on his way to our offices and bookstore, several miles away. We pulled over in the car. He didn’t want a ride. “This is a beautiful afternoon,” he said. “Everyone should be walking.”

Thomas gave an inspiring speech to our Earth and Spirit conference in Seattle in 1991 attended by over a thousand people. A friend and Native American elder from the Lummi Nation presented Thomas with a ceremonial drum. This was a great honor. When he left at the conclusion of the conference he wanted to walk to his hotel. We watched him as he walked down the street in the rain, the drum carried under his arm.

Through the years we have known Thomas, he has consistently challenged us to understand that we belong to the Earth Community and that humankind may be the one species that can think and act on behalf of all other beings. Therefore, we have been given a great privilege and a huge responsibility.

With Thomas we believe we are part of a new movement of hope that is increasing each day on our planet. A new vision has indeed entered our world, a vision of restored human/Earth relations, a vision of the communion of all beings, a vision of the wellbeing of all the children and creatures of the Earth, a vision that guides our way into the future.

Thomas wrote us a letter on the occasion of the dedication of the hall named in his honor. He had recently fallen and couldn’t travel to be with us. He wrote:

I remember well our meetings in the Olde House. These were venturesome days for me, wandering out into thoughtspaces that were as strange for me as for those patient enough to listen to me. Perhaps together we have contributed a little something toward the healing of the planet from the wounds it has experienced throughout the

20th century. It is our phase of the great journey into the future. Now is the time for creating the period when the human community might experience itself as a mutually-enhancing presence on the Earth...Such is the historical destiny assigned to our generation. Even so we can only begin the work. Perhaps our best work will be in providing the context in which the next generations will be able to function more effectively than we have been able to function...It is a joy to know that we can all join in this new center whose influence will long radiate through both the heavens and the Earth.

Thomas, it is your vision and your Great Work that will long radiate throughout the heavens and the Earth! We continue to dedicate our efforts to your vision, to seek the guidance of the Earth and the powers of the Universe, to join with others, and with the natural world, to bring into being a new ecological age.

We honor you and thank you from our hearts. You are our dear friend and mentor. You have shown us the way.