

How a Book Came to Be

Ellen LaConte

Ellen LaConte is a writer and suburban organic gardener living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She's a former homesteader in the Penobscot Bay bio-region of Maine, former President of Helen and Scott Nearing's Social Science Institute, and editor of *Starting Point* newsletter. Her reader-friendly meta-synthesis *Critical Mass: Why Everything's Gone Wrong Everywhere at Once & How to Fix It*—blurbbed by one reader as "Future Shock for the next decade"—is looking for a publisher.

I am finishing now the final draft of a book that I probably would not be writing, would not have been able to write, if I had not encountered Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*. Subsequently I have been informed, inspired and bolstered in my own efforts as a writer, reenergized as an organic gardener, and guided in my contemplative practices by *The Universe Story* and *The Great Work*.

This book I am writing is not my first response to Thomas's thought and work. That response was far too visceral, too emotional and intimate for reason to contain. Thomas impelled me through my feelings into fiction. My first short story involved a Jesuit converted by Thomas's thought into a mission of radical environmental activism. It was published in 1992 by *Gaia*, a short-lived literary journal. Two environmental novels followed and years of immersion in the Earth sages, green dreamers, environmental philosophers, communitarians, eco-economists, visionaries and thinkers whose work has developed, expanded on and complemented Thomas's work. By the time the agent for my novels had become ill and retired, I was ready to tackle Thomas's thought with my rational as well as my heart-mind. It has taken me two decades—and a move from Maine to North Carolina and into the sphere of influence of Herman Greene and the bracing embrace of the Center for Ecozoic Studies—to synthesize what I have learned from Thomas, and an additional seven years to find words that clearly express the synthesis.

Called, without humility, *Critical Mass: Why Everything's Going Wrong Everywhere & How to Fix It*, my book is an attempt to make core aspects of Thomas's teaching available to the critical mass of people that will be needed to accomplish the Great Work. My target market is people who are not already converted, those who will not read Thomas's books, who do not yet know that they ought to read them and, given current reading levels worldwide, would not easily be able to read them. I write for those whom the term "Ecozoic" would genuinely seem Greek, but for whom Thomas's Ecozoic vision would be life-altering and will be life saving.

What I owe Thomas Berry, then, is my life work. In every aspect the book *Critical Mass* is influenced by Thomas's own Great Works:

1. The premise: A description of the socio-political domination system, rooted historically in the first city-states and empires, and the global economy which that domination system supports and is supported by. This global system's impact on Earth's immune system is similar to the impact that HIV has on the human immune system. In other words, Earth has the equivalent of AIDS. This understanding harkens back twenty years to the second and third

chapters of *The Dream of The Earth*: “The Earth Community” and “Human Presence.” In my book, I quote Brian Swimme’s “Foreword:” “These essays of Thomas Berry are like the invention of the eye with which to see the Earth.” That eye, opened in me by Thomas’s vision, has seen more clearly, deeply and widely than it would have otherwise.

2. The essential problem with the way we inhabit Earth, as I understand Thomas’s critique of it, is that our activities as a species are disastrous for the majority of us and for other-than-human beings. These activities compromise the function of hundred-million-years old, self-regulating, self-healing biological systems. Complex living systems are the creative expression of a billions-of-years old universe. Under the influence of a global economy, we are living beyond Earth’s means the same way many of us are living beyond our own means, with similar results: bankruptcy. Examples of that understanding can be found in *The Universe Story* and Chapter 12 of *The Great Work*, “The Extractive Economy.”
3. What are we to do about this human trespass on “the wild and the sacred?” Life has succeeded by living within Earth’s means. After a couple of near-failures that are explained in *The Universe Story*, living things learned the importance of community, diversity, and self-organization—a trio of sustainability skills I call “organic democracy”—in order to survive.
4. What would it mean to live within Earth’s means, to heal Earth’s compromised immune system? What would it mean to adopt “a more benign mode of presence,” to “become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing”—to manifest the Ecozoic? Thomas has given us the answer, of course, in all his writings. It would mean summoning the forces that have guided the universe, following the guidance of those who have come before us and are wise in life’s ways. In my terms it would mean bringing our lifeways into harmony with life by mimicking life’s ways.

Economic, organically democratic, diverse, interdependent communities of humans living intimately with, consciously like, and lovingly within their natural communities and bioregions may yet mitigate and enable us to survive Critical Mass and to bring into being the Ecozoic Era.

I would not have known how to think this thought or even that I should be thinking such thoughts as well as learning how to share and embody them, if Sierra Club had not been prescient enough to give the world Thomas Berry’s particular and passionate *The Dream of the Earth*.