

The Great Red Oak Sapling

Miriam MacGillis

In May of 1990, Thomas Berry joined us at Genesis Farm in New Jersey for a day of celebration on the occasion of our 10th anniversary. He presented us with a small potted seedling, sprouted from an acorn of the Great Red Oak that stood outside the Riverdale Center on the Hudson River. He had dedicated *The Dream of the Earth* to this ancient oak.

It was a beautiful gift whose meaning we were just beginning to grow into after the first decade of settling into this place and laying the many relationships upon which its support would stand. The seedling was an apt symbol of the mystery of those initial ten years, as we too were just sprouting into something with a clear form and some resemblance to the inner forces which had given birth to the farm.

Genesis Farm had been planted by my Dominican Congregation, drawn from its own roots in the pursuit and contemplation of truth. The farm held the commitment to strive toward a new just and peaceful world order building on my work with Global Education Associates. It sought to explore the wisdom and insight of indigenous cultures, especially of the Lenape peoples who had lived in these northeast woodlands for centuries mingling that wisdom with the rich legacy of ecumenism flowing through the American religious landscape. We grounded our work in a keen *sense of place* giving our energies to the future of this bioregion in the Appalachian Ridge and Limestone valley still giving shape to the flow of the Delaware River.

But the taproot of our identity and mission had already penetrated the bedrock of a new *cosmological vision*, laid down from the insights and writings of Thomas Berry. My first encounter with him during Easter week of 1977 was by all accounts a transformative and life-changing experience, setting me in a direction which I have embraced wholeheartedly these last 30-some years. When he collaborated with Brian Swimme to give a narrative story out of which to situate our personal lives in an unfolding universe, the direction became a monumental force of attraction.

As I ponder the red oak sapling, now easily 20-feet high, pushing down and spreading its roots deep in these soils, I think of the many other people, events, centers, movements, projects and initiatives which are sprouting and blooming all over the earth by countless people who have been equally moved by the vision of this extraordinary man.

Thomas often refers to the cosmological dimensions of the great archetypes of Earth's peoples. One of them is the Tree of Life. He suggests that with our new vision of deep time, we extend this metaphor to Universe itself. This primary Tree of Life is still giving birth and nourishment to new buds of historic moments, creative events, and powerful forces clinging to and flaming forth with the brilliance of life itself. Surely there is a new budding in this present moment from which is emerging a movement of people out of the vision of deep time whose veil Thomas has lifted for us.

Miriam MacGillis is the Director of Genesis Farm, which she co-founded in 1980 with the sponsorship of her Dominican Congregation. For nearly thirty years she has offered programs there exploring the work of Thomas Berry, and experimenting with aspects of bioregionalism, sustainable agriculture, energy, building, economics, education, art and ritual. She has also lectured extensively on these topics throughout North America and in Europe, Asia and the Pacific.



The pathos in our own situation is that our secular society does not see the numinous quality or the deeper psychic powers associated with its own story, while the religious society rejects the story because it is presented only in its physical aspect. The remedy for this is to establish a deeper understanding of the universe as revealed through our own empirical insight into the mysteries of its functioning.

*In this late twentieth century that can now be done with a clarity never before available to us. Empirical inquiry into the universe reveals that from its beginning in the galactic system to its early expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic-spiritual as well a physical-material dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere. The human is seen as an addendum or an intrusion and thus finds no real place in the story of the universe. In reality the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe itself, its capacities to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness (*The Dream of the Earth*, 132).*

When Thomas parted this veil in his inimitable language, he provided an opening through all the dark and difficult challenges of our time. This opening points to so much possibility. It illuminates the differences between hope and despair, living and dying, struggle and collapse, and the great convergence of faith, hope and love as they extend to the entire web of being.

Standing on this new side of the veil of deep time, yet grounded in the here and now, legions of people bless you, Thomas. And so does the young Red Oak rising out of the soils of this land. So does the future...



Thomas Berry, T Mullin, and Miriam MacGillis