

## Thomas Taught Us: Read the Natural World and Reinvent the Human

Susannah Malarkey and Harriet Hope

*“We can’t discover ourselves without first discovering the universe and the Earth.”*  
—Thomas Berry

We met Thomas Berry in the Spring of 1987 here in San Rafael. He had been invited by the Religious Studies Department to be the primary speaker at a series of faculty and student seminars held at the Dominican College campus next to our Santa Sabina Retreat Center. We walked over to the College library and heard him address the faculty on the topic of “Education for the 21st Century” and “The Spirituality of the Earth.” We were profoundly affected by the clarity, power and truth in Thomas’s words.

However, when Thomas advised his listeners on the college religious studies faculty to “put the Bible on the shelf for 20 years and read the sacred Scripture of the natural world”, we suspected that he might not get invited back to this venue! Later that day we encountered Thomas as he walked through the 130-year-old campus under the ancient spreading trees. We walked with him and invited him to come to us here at Santa Sabina Center the following year for a retreat. We remember well this first conversation, his willingness to come to us, and his observation, “This is a benign place.”

So on the weekend of February 19-21, 1988 Thomas joined us for the “Spirituality of the Earth,” for what would be the first of five truly exceptional weekend retreat experiences here at Santa Sabina between 1988 and 1998: “Befriending the Earth” in 1992, “The Human Presence Within the Earth Community” in 1994, “The Meadow Across the Creek” in 1996 and “It Takes a Universe” in 1998. And in 1990, Thomas and Brian Swimme gathered at Santa Sabina with several other New Story thinkers and friends for a weekend of manuscript review and reflection prior to the publication of Thomas and Brian’s collaborative work, *The Universe Story*.

The insight that had first captured us in listening to Thomas in that Spring of 1987 was his’ seminal conviction that “*the primary revelation of the divine is the natural world.*” His landmark book, *The Dream of the Earth*, became the center of our reading, reflection and study between these richly textured retreats over the next 10 years. A section of our Center library has been devoted to Thomas’s work, his books, a collection of his many articles and addresses, and a large bulletin board from which he smiles out at us. Thomas had himself become, and remains for us, a primary revelation of the divine in the marvelous humanity, humor, warmth and wisdom of his nature, in his wonder and delight at the beauty and magnificent diversity of the natural world, in his ability to capture our imaginations with the “New Story” of the unfolding universe and of our place within it.

Susannah Malarkey is the Director and Harriet Hope the Program Director of the Santa Sabina Retreat Center in San Rafael, Northern California where they have collaborated for 25 years to create an environment and programs that manifest the “primary revelation of the divine in the natural world” within the context of “Contemplative Ways of Being.”

We have had several rare opportunities, other than his times here with us at Santa Sabina, to savor our friendship with Thomas in more personal ways. For Harriet, there was sitting with him sharing books in 1989 on a bench under the spreading great red oak at the Riverdale Center in New York; for both of us there was meeting him in St. John's Cathedral in the Autumn of 1993 and listening as he addressed the full cathedral with such eloquence on "The Wild and the Sacred;" there was visiting him twice in North Carolina, laughing and talking, listening and learning over wine and a good dinner at his favorite diner. There was always the warmth, always the marvelous laughter, always the natural wisdom of his ways along with those incisive insights into the whole range of the cultural, historical and evolutionary history of life on our planet. Thomas has called all of us within the human community to "reinvent ourselves on the species level." In his person we see that this is possible.

Thomas has been over these past two decades our primary mentor and treasured friend. We even named our cat after him! "TBerry," now at the advanced age of 16, is a warm and well loved grey tabby who reminds us daily of how deeply Thomas has woven himself into our lives and the life of Santa Sabina Center. We are grateful.



Harriet Hope and Susannah Malarkey