

## Vision Keeper

Angela Manno

Thomas Berry's friendship and influence on my art and thinking is immeasurable.

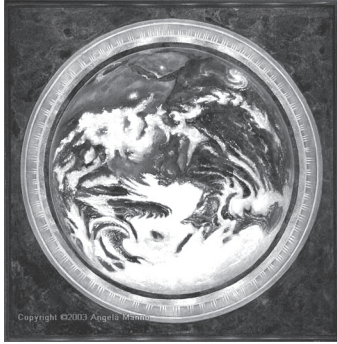
I was first introduced to Thomas's work in 1986 through the Gaia Institute at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City. Students were given a paper he'd written titled, "The Lower Hudson Valley as a Bio-region." I'd never read anything like it—in fact, it kind of blew my mind. I was in the beginnings of putting together an anthology of art and original essays and interviews of individuals who were laying the foundation for a sustainable human presence on the planet and knew immediately I wanted Thomas to be involved. I put together a short letter on the idea for my anthology and sent it to Thomas along with a reproduction of one of my artworks that would head up the chapter on "Human-Earth Relations." To my surprise and delight, I promptly received a response from him with his interest and some very nice things to say about my artwork, *Earth Steward*. Soon I met Thomas for the first time and then we began to meet frequently at the diner in Riverdale and at the Center to discuss ideas for his essay. His warmth and generosity were so forthcoming, and his thought began to penetrate my heart and mind. Within a year or so, Thomas had written his essay for the anthology and I continued to interview him to flesh out other themes I wanted to be included. This led to a friendship and exchange that has lasted over twenty years.

During the early years of our friendship, I became engaged and I asked Thomas if he would officiate. He agreed. I dreamed of the day Thomas would present my husband-to-be and me to the Universe as a new being, ready to serve the Earth each in our own capacities and together as a couple passionate about our beautiful planet. But the marriage never came to be and I spent many months in deep despair. Thomas and I continued to meet, talk and have lunch during this period and his kindness and compassion were great comforts. In the coming years, the Universe Story became a more overt subject for my art and, in support of this direction, Thomas wrote a letter of support for me to some grant making organizations where I was applying for fellowships. When I would visit him, I would always bring Thomas reproductions as a gift and to show him what I'd been working on. He was always encouraging and showed a deep appreciation for my work in particular and in general for what art could do to create a new mystique regarding nature and our proper relationship to the Earth. His encouragement and faith in me allowed me to keep going, even during some truly dark times.

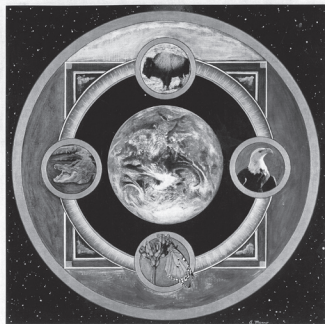
I spent several years practicing Byzantine Russian icon painting that overlapped with in-depth studies of the New Cosmology under the Earth Literacy Certificate Program at Genesis Farm. In this period I conceived of

Angela Manno is an internationally exhibited artist whose art is in the permanent fine art collections of NASA, the Smithsonian Institution and in private collections around the US, Europe, South America and the Middle East. See [www.angelamanno.com](http://www.angelamanno.com). She conceived and is editing *Planetary Perspectives*, a collection of original essays and interviews with visionaries who are laying the foundation for a sustainable human presence on the planet. She studied Earth Literacy at Genesis Farm and is developing a written teachers' manual with accompanying CDs for her Eco-spirituality & Action course.





The Earthly Paradise: Icon of the Third Millennium, by Angela Manno



"The Animal Kingdom" by Angela Manno from her series "All My Relations"

a contemporary "Earth Icon" to reflect the congruity I recognized between this ancient way of knowing out of the Russian Orthodox tradition and empirical science as contemplated in the Universe Story. The icon is created in stages and recapitulates in liturgical fashion, the act of our own creation. There was a clear correspondence between these stages and the sequence of transformations in the cosmos over the past 15 billion years. So in 1994, I went to see Thomas again and went over the stages to confirm (or not) the congruity of these two disciplines. As always, Thomas answered my many questions, mostly having to do with terms used in iconography and whether they had a corresponding meaning in terms of the Universe Story. We were both astonished to confirm the many similarities.

After that meeting, we were out of touch for a while, and later I learned of his move to North Carolina and his stroke. I sought him out and on the eve of giving my first class of "Eco-spirituality and Action" to the Quakers in New York City, we were on the phone and Thomas gave me a passage from the Bible that I read to the first class during the opening slide show of the cosmos and life on Earth. It was a transcendent moment for us all. In a few weeks, I went to visit him and brought some heavy-duty sound equipment to interview Thomas for a documentary I was and still am working on. We spent two consecutive days recording, reminiscing and catching up. His stamina, despite the effects of his stroke amazed me! I shared the progress of the anthology that had grown exponentially since it first began and Thomas gave me some leads to get it published. I shared my new work with him—my landscape paintings, which differed significantly from the conceptual work he'd known me to do in the past. He seemed as delighted as ever enjoying the colors and effects of shadow and sunlight on wheat fields, vineyards, sand dunes and lavender fields.

When I returned home, I received a DVD of Thomas reciting his poetry.

I recently began rereading *The Great Work* and every word is for me charged with such profound energy, such irrefutable insight, it's as if I'm reading it for the first time. His writings are the answer to a confused world seeking out its next steps into its own future. They spell the pattern, the vision, the image of a viable integral world that I think we all know in our hearts can exist, despite the difficulties. Through his words resounds the call deep within me, each one of us and the Earth itself, to what is highest in the spiritual journey.

Thomas Berry, my friend, mentor and oft-time muse is the father of a *sangha*, a spiritual community without which awakening cannot be sustained. He is the Vision Keeper for millennia to come as we walk into the future as One Single Sacred Community. I am grateful to him beyond words for shining light on the path that so many of us have traveled and that I have walked for the greater portion of my life.