

Three Letters to Thomas Berry (1994-2008)

Robert McDermott

Note: As a way of publicizing my inestimable indebtedness to Thomas Berry, scholarly visionary and saintly ecologist, I am sharing with readers of this publication three of my letters to him. By way of context, let me explain that I first met Thomas 1953, when I was 14, and had a job waiting tables at the Passionist Retreat Center in Jamaica, New York. I joined his seminar on Dante. My wife, Ellen, and I were close to him while we were students at Queens College, CUNY. He gave me a copy of the Bhagavad Gita when I went to graduate school at Boston University. He officiated at our wedding in 1964 and baptized our two children. I attended his courses at St. John's University on Indian and Chinese civilization. When he decided not to accept a senior Fulbright grant to the Open University, he in effect gave it to me. I was one of his closest student-colleague-friends through the 1960s and '70s. Brian Swimme, my friend and colleague in the department of Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness at the California Institute of Integral Studies, in a sense succeeded me in 1982; in 1990, when I was appointed President of CIIS, and Brian joined the faculty of CIIS, I rejoined the circle of Thomas's next-generation collaborators. I also reconnected with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, whom I had known through Thomas in the late '60s and early '70s in New York. I have left these letters as I wrote them, including mention of my family members, simply because Thomas has been a part of my family, and always will be.

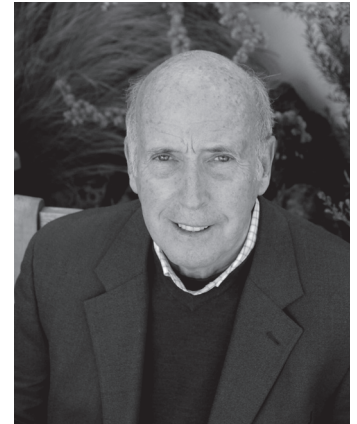
27 December 1994

Dear Thomas,

It seems that some letters are too important to write on time. They require a healthy period of brooding and regrets about the inadequacy of expression and the poverty of words. Such letters also require quiet time, ideally a day set aside to listen, remember and appreciate. Yesterday, at Christmas dinner, surrounded by my mother, Deirdre, and special friends (Rick Tarnas, David Ulansey, Andrew Harvey, and their respective families), I drank deeply of the mythic cycles of renewal and rebirth—all of which reminded me that I first read Eliade's *Cosmos and History* at your suggestion and have ever since associated with your influence my understanding and practice of mythic thinking. You have been very much with me throughout this Christmas season for all of the reasons we both know—your next stage of life symbolized by your move back home from Riverdale, your thrilling eightieth birthday celebration at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and your memorable visit here in November.

Whenever Ellen or I describe the expressions of gratitude and affection for your great generosity of spirit and visionary insights, we invariably dwell on the range of your activities and influence. In addition to learning the languages, studying the world's scriptures, and writing the books, you

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still made time to visit the tiny convents off the main roads. After all these years I am still bewildered that you found so much time to introduce me to your vision of global spirituality in its details as well as in its grand sweep. It was from you directly that I first made contact with the Indian spiritual-cultural traditions from the Vedas to Gandhi, the Chinese traditions from Confucius and Lau Tse through Tu Fu to Mao, and the whole of Buddhism from the experience of Gautama to the Dalai Lama.

But there was much more: Dante, Eliade, Voegelin, Teilhard and Jung. Except for the American process thinkers to whom I was introduced by my brother John and his colleagues at Queens College, and Sri Aurobindo and Rudolf Steiner—to both of whom I was led unmistakably by the sure hand of karma—it was primarily from you, in courses and conversations, that I received the spiritual and intellectual orientation of my life work. Integral Studies as an institution and as an ideal can be viewed quite simply as an extension of your vision and specific contributions.

Sadly, I was terribly slow to see the significance of your study of Native American spirituality and I did not really appreciate the significance of your work on behalf of ecology until five years ago when I had the good fortune to join your many friends and admirers here in San Francisco. For a dozen years or more it confused me that you seemed to show no interest in Steiner despite his unmatched understanding of the evolution of consciousness, Christ and the Earth, and yet during those same years I missed the significance of your work—not entirely, of course, but to a degree that I now find impossible to believe.

I followed you into all of the great thinkers and causes of our time, but when I found Steiner, and came increasingly to regard his spiritual research, his methods and the works which they generated (especially Waldorf education), I began to find other thinkers comparatively less satisfying on those same questions. It has been only in the past four years, and particularly due to the triple blessing of Brian, *The Dream of the Earth*, and *The Universe Story*, that I resumed thinking the thoughts which you were first to articulate. This was easy to do because from the time that I first gratefully put myself under your guidance and inspiration, I faithfully held you with a deep and joyous filial piety. While there were years when I was not rethinking your prophetic thoughts, there was never a time when I was not imitating you in my effort to think lovingly and globally.

I visited the extent of our teacher-student relationship and our friendship when I prepared my Inaugural Address just four years ago, and again when I prepared for the Institute's granting to you an honorary doctorate last September. On both of these occasions, I contemplated the complex and enormously satisfying process of seed-sowing, of the teacher planting ideas and insights which grow as though miraculously after a period of dormancy. I am still awakening to your seed-ideas and to the vast reach of your cultiva-

tion not only around the globe but retrospectively for millions of years and into the future. If it didn't take a generation for such ideas to bear fruit, it wouldn't be prophecy.

The relationship between Brian and myself continues to deepen and will surely grow in ways which involve both the Center and the Institute. I hope you can take a measure of satisfaction that two of your students are joined in your work as well as in friendship, and are in collaboration with many others, including Bruce and Pamela Bochte, Charlene Spretnak and Ralph Metzner, in our frail but most promising institution. Through no particular foresight, I now have the highly privileged opportunity to advance the joint commitments of the Center for the Story of the Universe and Integral Studies, two institutions committed individually and collaboratively to the ideals which you have been articulating and advocating for the past twenty years.

In addition to our commitments to you and to your work, and of course our deep respect and affection for each other, Brian and I are also joined by the program in Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness which Rick Tarnas has developed with Brian, David Ulansey, Charlene Spretnak, myself and a few others. This program puts cosmology in close relation to an enlarged and enlivened conception of philosophy as well as to the depth dimensions of psychology (*i.e.*, Jung). These are the colleagues you should have had at your side when you were our age—but you couldn't because it took your work to make our work possible.

Whenever we get together Brian and I conspire to bring you here to meet with the Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness students and faculty; we also talk about our visiting you in Greensboro. For now, though, I am sure that you are focusing on your move, on the disposition of your library and closing of the Riverdale Center. Pamela and Bruce told me that 180 people came for the last meeting of the Teilhard Society!

I remember you referring to trips to the West coast in the spring, and hope that we can lure you to the Bay Area at that time. In the intervening months, I know you will be busy ending your life on the Hudson cliff, under the great oak, and focusing on the next phase in Greensboro: The return.

In this outpouring of long-stored gratitude and affection, I didn't mention the deep joy it has been for Ellen to share with me the blessings you have bestowed upon us—on our marriage, our children, on our spiritual aspirations and, in recent years, on our work for Integral Studies. Your blessings run deep, and ray out; we can't track their outer edges.

I hope that despite your unfailing modesty you will be able to take some pleasure in this recounting of the ways we have been joined—as teacher-student, as friends, as collaborators in the service of worthy ideals.

With much love and gratitude, and with best wishes for the next phase of your life.

November 9, 2004

Dear Thomas,

I hope word reaches you often that during your ten years in Greensboro your influence has not faded in the program that includes Brian, Charlene, and myself, and everyone's favorite global poet, Drew Dellinger. Your thoughts and inspiration are as influential as ever. Currently in Berkeley, Mary Evelyn and John are making *The Great Work* even greater. If I ever make a contribution to ecological philosophy, as I hope to, it will be largely because of their influence—and, of course, your influence on them.

This semester, while on sabbatical, I am writing an essay on "Krishna, Buddha, and Christ," developing an approach I learned first from you. Next semester, I will teach "Asian Spiritual Masters—Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and the Dalai Lama," similarly influenced by your vast and deep vision of spiritual reality manifest through history and the Earth.

I have heard from Mary Evelyn that when you are not occupied with therapy for your stubborn shoulder, you are busy editing your unpublished essays. I think you should publish them with the original ditto purple hue as a way for readers to see that the writings of some authors gain greater relevance with the passage of time. This is so because the ideas were true when first thought, and still true, but more urgent because the world has gone further off course, and deeper into darkness. As the shadow seems invariably to accompany the light, so, as we learn from John's Prologue, does light overcome the darkness. Auden reminds in "September 1, 1939," ironic points of light flash out wherever the just exchange their messages.

You have been, and are, one of the truly bright points of light in our time, showing, as Auden says, "an affirming flame."

Ellen joins me in sending our love on your ninetieth birthday. Loving thoughts for you come as well from our children, Darren Thomas, your namesake in Hong Kong, proud papa of Benna Helen, and Deirdre a nurse practitioner in San Francisco, expecting her first child in February. I hope you know that you are surrounded by a circle of grateful friends sending you love, good health, and support for your healing dream for all sentient beings, especially for the Earth.

With love for you always.

5 May 2008

Dear Thomas,

As I often say, my career has had three parts: in my first third I followed you down your many paths—Dante, Indian religions, Buddhism, Eliade, Jung; in the second third, while you were morphing into a world famous geologist and prophet of “The Great Work,” I was studying Steiner and running several anthroposophical institutions; in the third phase, while still working from Steiner’s perspective (which is by now thoroughly my own), I am once again following your pioneering and truly profound vision, and doing so in collaboration with Brian, Mary Evelyn, and John. Great to be home!

You would have enjoyed the three-credit course that Brian and I just finished teaching on Teilhard. With more than 32 graduate students registered, and some days many more than thirty in the room, we worked through Ursula King’s “Spirit of Fire,” “The Human Phenomenon,” “The Heart of Matter,” “Christianity and Evolution,” and “Teilhard in the 21st Century.” It was a great event for all of us, especially for students who knew nothing of Teilhard in advance and now see him as one of the great healing prophetic figures of our time.

Last Wednesday, Brian, Mary Evelyn, and I had the pleasure of a lengthy lunch with Marc Andrus, the new Episcopal Bishop of California, a very ecological and spiritual man. We were united in gratitude to you. Mary Evelyn and Brian can tell you all the names that he and they took turns mentioning, all people influenced by your deep and significant vision. You would have enjoyed overhearing our conversation, just as you would have enjoyed listening in on the Teilhard course.

Judging by your increasing influence in San Francisco, it is very clear that you did not waste your time running off those purple “propaganda” sheets decades ago and now, thanks to Mary Evelyn’s midwifery, reemerging in three handsome volumes. You should be very pleased that the spirit has used you so effectively and that so many have joined you in “The Great Work.” It surely has been a great joy for me to rejoin you and your circle of inspiring collaborators.

Sending you affection and gratitude always.