

One Hour Changed My Life Forever

Henry McKoy

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I have been alive for 319,740 hours (give or take a few hours) at the time that I am writing this. That makes me 36-and-a-half years old for those who do not wish to do the math. Of those almost 320,000 hours, I only knew Thomas Berry for 1. But in that single hour, my life was changed.

On a warm morning in late May 2009, I found myself on the passenger side of a vehicle driven by Herman Greene speeding the 45 minute or so drive from Chapel Hill to Greensboro to visit Thomas Berry, whom I had never met before.

It is hard to describe what I felt as I arrived in Greensboro and began walking across the parking lot to the front door of his facility. I had no great expectations though I must admit to feeling a bit antsy at the thought of sitting across from such a great man and talking about my work.

Talking about my work is something that I do quite often. I do it almost daily and sometimes multiple times a day, as I travel this world and talk of society's need to rebalance what many of us call the "Triple Bottom Line" of People, Planet, and Profits—ensuring that the "people" and "planet" get top priority. What I hope my work is about is uncovering God's single and simple truth that all of us on this planet have a greatness and uniqueness about us; yet until we as a society realize, nurture, and invest in that collective truth, that we won't ever reach our highest actualization.

I understand to a certain extent why people appreciate my work and why it resonates with them. Still, I felt somewhat inadequate to speak of that work to someone like Thomas Berry. So as I arrived at the door of his room on May 27, 2009 sometime within the 9 o'clock hour, I wondered how the paucity of my work could ever matter to him after he had spent a lifetime impacting the world with his thoughts, writings and actions.

Yet with one small gesture, everything became fine: *he smiled.*

As Herman and I entered the room, Reverend Berry smiled a wonderful smile. He sat fully upright in a recliner, dressed for the day and draped in a brightly colored blanket as Herman had said he would be. He appeared to be in deep thought but that was quickly replaced with a healthy amount of energy and alertness followed immediately by the kind of grand smile one often sees from those of age when visitors arrive to see them. Though this was our first ever meeting, he immediately motioned that I should pull a chair up close to him.

For the next hour or so, he and I shared our words with one another. That dialogue was largely driven by questions (very thoughtful questions) and recognitions (of both similarities and differences) and as I am sure has probably always been his manner, he made me feel like the center of the room. He asked when I was born (1973), where I was born (Fayetteville, NC), and about my childhood (a poor Black country boy); he asked about

my wife (Euba) and her professional work (a high school math teacher); he asked about my kids (Jamila and Jalen) and their ages (9 and 7) and what they like to do (art, science, math, play) and even the name of their school (Southwest Elementary); he asked about the neighborhood we lived in (a working class neighborhood in southeast Durham, NC) and even asked about my track career (from many years ago). Beyond that he wanted to know about my work, seeming to get a kick out of the fact that I classify myself as a “green and sustainable banker.”

With each question he would ask, he would immediately identify the similarity or difference in our stories. Upon finding out that I was born in 1973, he immediately informed me that he was born in 1914. After telling him that I was born in Fayetteville, he smiled and indicated that we were both born and raised in North Carolina. He seemed to truly enjoy hearing about not only my current work, but also about my life. As he spoke his words, often slowly, I had two immediate thoughts. One thought was that he had already accomplished an entire world of successes before I was even born – as he was already nearly 59-years-old by that time. My second thought was just how inquisitive and alert this 94-year-old was, and how his curiosity still remained as powerful as ever. He would ask me a question, listen to my answer, and then re-state it to me which indicated his full understanding; and then follow that with another connected question. He also asked about very contemporary questions regarding the President, the overall economy, and the recession’s impact on lives—being saddened by the idea of so many people being out of work and losing their homes.

If I had been amazed before, then I was blown away soon after. After being prodded to talk a bit about his own work, he easily moved into doing so, though he seemed surprised that I would want to hear about it. And with what seemed like even more energy, he held up three fingers and stated that there are “3 things that are important to remember” regarding our collective existence on this planet. Just at that moment, I felt a need to capture whatever I could from this talk as that emptiness I had felt had begun to be filled with the spirit of Thomas Berry. I reached into my jacket pocket, removed the pen and note pad that I always carry and began to write.

With great precision he identified each of those three things as “1) Identity; 2) Difference; and 3) Unity.” Then one by one, he talked about each of them in great detail. No notes, no pauses, no stammers or stutters. As one might be prone to say after a great performance – “he nailed it!” And I must admit to being a bit embarrassed, as I realized that at 36, I might have a hard time identifying through mental recall three parts of a theory and reciting it in great detail—whereas he did it with such fluidity and command. He continued on speaking of relationships, shared experiences

and dreams that all Earth's species have; finally finishing with a charge of humanity to "reinvent the Human Experience." His dialogue to me seemed less like a recitation of experiences, and more like instructions.

I repeat: I was blown away. I was blown away because I knew that this had been no "great performance," instead it had been his "great work."

Just before 11am, it was time for us to leave the visit and head back east up Interstate 40. I admit that this was a bitter sweet moment for me, as I recognized that a man of his age needed his rest, yet wanted to take in as much of his words and wisdom as possible. Before leaving, with that glowing window as a backdrop, I took several photos. Standing beside a tall bookshelf at the foot of his bed, I was instructed to pick up a small and rosy colored book. In my hand, I held *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, written by Reverend Berry a decade prior (1999). Such a small book—with such a powerful title.

After opening the book and briefly reading over a passage, I returned the missive, smiled and waved goodbye to this great man whom I had just spent an hour with—an hour that I knew had changed my life, even as I walked out of his room. Though I had entered to meet a stranger, I left with what seemed like an old friend. I could not wait to see him again to pick up where our conversation had ended.

Five days later, I would receive word that Reverend Berry had passed away sometime around sunrise. Just as quickly as he had entered my life—he had left it. And though I had known him only an hour, I felt a profound loss at hearing the news. Even more intriguing to me was that on that very morning I had awoken suddenly and without explanation at 6:30 a.m.—five minutes after the stated time of his death. For the rest of that day, I balanced my sadness with an even greater sense of honor at having had the chance to meet him in his final days. This was coupled with a consistent questioning of whether it all had some greater meaning or not. And if so—then what?

I fully realized, based on laws of probability, that I must have been among the last—if not the very last—*new* person that he met and talked to in his life. I realized that I must have been among the last—if not the very last—new person that he verbally shared his work with and that he spoke to about what he felt was left to do in this world. That felt like a heavy load to me. I did not know what any of that had meant nor how (or if) any of it was somehow connected or related to the acceleration of my own work and status this year around many of the same themes that Reverend Berry spent his life pushing forward.

At exactly 6:25 a.m. the morning following his death, I again woke suddenly and without explanation. However, this time three words rushed

across my brain at the very moment that I experienced consciousness: THE GREAT WORK! “THE GREAT WORK” just kept rushing through my mind along with images of Thomas Berry from our visit and the words that he shared with me. I recalled the passage that I had briefly read when I picked up *The Great Work* at the end of our visit. It read, “Perhaps the most valuable heritage we can provide for future generations is some sense of the Great Work that is before them...”

For the next week, I woke up every single morning without an alarm and without assistance at exactly 6:30am. Now a week hence, I am happy to report that I have returned to some level of normalcy regarding my sleep.

I admit that I still do not know whether the meeting between Thomas Berry and me at the end of his life and at the acceleration of my work has any greater meaning than some sort of ironic coincidence. However, those of us who believe in the Divine Wisdom of God would probably hypothesize that there are few coincidences. In any case, I must ask myself, “what if somehow Dr. Berry was passing on his Great Work to me in our one hour interaction?” But more likely, what if he was not only passing it to me—but to all of us who remain behind? As he would tell us—we are all a part of Earth’s history; thus a part of Earth’s future. As he instructed me on that day—we must ALL re-invent the human experience.

That, in my own humble opinion, is THE GREAT WORK that remains. That, in my humble opinion, is and will be the greatest tribute to the life and times of Thomas Berry. Beyond words, sentiments, and theories, it will be living out the human story at its highest level that will pay homage to the man that we are here to celebrate.

One may think that I am making much more out of this meeting than is justified; and maybe they are right. The obvious question is, “who am I and why would I be so important that somehow I would be summoned to Thomas Berry’s side at the end of his life to accept some instruction from him or take a symbolic baton from him in this relay of life and work?” My answer to you is—“I don’t know?” However, I cannot help but think that there may have been a much larger significance to it all.

There has been so much reaction, challenge and criticism even, about the “erasure” of Black people from his work. Yet there I sat, a 36-year-old Black man, only a couple of feet away from this 94-year-old White man sharing our work with one another. It was the embodiment of his theories and thoughts in action. He emphasized that day that our world would only survive through the acceptance and actions related to Identity, Difference, and Unity. Thomas Berry and I, in that one hour, firmly established our identities on this planet, our differences in this world, yet found out what unified us. If more of us (even all of us) on this planet could do that then

we would finally erect a tribute worthy of his life and move us all closer to the human experience that I believe God has envisioned for us.

Thomas Berry was sharp as a tack until the very end. In just one hour, he filled me with his GREAT wisdom, his GREAT spirit, his GREAT curiosity, his GREAT generosity, and most of all—his GREAT work. I will always consider that one of the GREAT gifts of my life.

Thomas Berry lived almost 830,000 hours in his life; I've lived almost 320,000. I don't know what it did for him, but the one hour or so of that time in which we spent together changed my life forever. As is the nature of most religions, including my own (Christianity), I believe that Dr. Berry has gone on to a better place to seek his reward for a life well-lived and a job well-done.

I cannot wait to see him again...and pick up where our conversation ended.