

Images, Inspiration, Identity

Patricia Mische

Thomas Berry has given me images, inspiration, understandings, and deepened consciousness of Earth and my true identity or “self” for which I will be forever grateful. First came images. Words came later.

I saw Thomas for the first time in the mid-1970s. He was sitting under a great oak tree outside his center in Riverdale, New York. The tree’s 400-year-old gnarled roots were sunk deep into rocky cliffs above the Hudson River. Over millions of years the river below had cut its way through hundreds of miles of solid rock determined to find its way to the Atlantic ocean. The sun was setting over the Hudson when we arrived, an yellow, orange, and red streaks blazed across the sky. The oak tree was silhouetted against these flames of color and I watched as the flames faded into dusk once again on a rotating Earth. This image is blazed forever in me. Thomas sat with his back against the oak’s trunk, dwarfed in body by the tree’s great size, but elevated in spirit by the life he drew from it. There were about thirty people sitting on the ground around Thomas, totally enrapt in his words, writing them down in notebooks or just soaking them in.

I don’t remember anything Thomas said that night. But the image of the man, the tree, the Earth, river and sky resonated deeply then and now. Later I came to see that Thomas breathed the energy and spirit of the universe that coursed through the tree, the earth, the sky, and the water into his own lungs and body and the veins of his mind from whence this energy and spirit were expressed in words and teaching. It was as if the universe spoke through him. No, not “as if.” This is not metaphor. The two had become one reality.

As a girl growing up along the Minnesota River I had always felt closest to God in nature. Later, fresh out of college, I lived and taught in Africa where these early seeds of Earth consciousness and spirituality were further developed. I was reading Teilhard’s *Phenomenon of Man* at the time the Leakey’s were discovering the oldest human fossil forms not far from where I taught, and Glenn was orbiting the Earth in the first manned-space flight, with tracking stations along the equator just down the road from my house. My African students were of a new generation that had to live at once as members of tribal, national, and global communities, carrying all these identities at once. And I was learning from them to do the same. My former narrow sense of history and self exploded in all directions, from my growing sense of the emergence of our earliest human history out of planetary forces in an ancient past, to the now emerging space age and farthest reaches of a planetary future. My notion of God and the sacred was also leaping over past theological bounds. I had long carried what I thought was my own special secret and source of joy that God dwelt in and not over nature. Now I also knew God in time and evolution. I sometimes expressed the joy of this knowing in poetry and later in spiritual writing,

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but not in theological discussion because it seemed too forbidden to cross the accepted theological boundaries. I feared that my secret knowledge and joy would be trampled or diminished by labels of heresy.

But that night under the great oak tree I saw that Thomas also understood and lived in the joy of this special knowing, and that he was not afraid to express his knowing despite possible repercussions from those engaged in theological boundaries. As an educator, too, I saw that Thomas had escaped the walls of academia that imprison minds. Under the tree he was freeing minds to penetrate deeper sources of truth in the natural world. All this I saw as the sun set behind the great oak.. But I had not yet read anything by Thomas. Indeed, until that night I had not heard his name. Over the next three decades this would change and I would become editor, publisher, fellow educator of his work.

Jerry Mische and I had founded Global Education Associates in 1971. The vision and mission for GEA came from our experience in developing countries and the challenge of Teilhard de Chardin to “build the Earth.” I had begun reading Teilhard in Kenya and after our marriage Jerry and I read and discussed every one of Teilhard’s books. In GEA we offered educational programs, published materials and undertook global networking that would advance deepened spirituality and global systemic change that we felt was part of this great work of building the Earth. All this was before we heard of Thomas Berry. Then one day, Sr. Miriam Therese MacGillis, who joined our staff in the mid-1970s, invited us to go with her to Riverdale, NY to hear and meet Thomas Berry. She felt he was a kindred spirit on the journey we had undertaken. At the time GEA was publishing *The Whole Earth Papers* that had as its logo a yin/yang circle within which we had designed the silhouette of an oak tree with gnarled roots sunk deep into the water and soil and with branches reaching high into the air. A bird was taking flight from the tree, carrying its seeds to new destinations. When I saw Thomas under the great oak that first time I knew immediately we were kindred spirits on a shared Earth journey.

Over the next two decades Thomas was a frequent speaker at GEA-sponsored conferences and seminars. His presentations were always a highlight for participants. We also began publishing his articles in *The Whole Earth Papers*, and a later GEA publication, *Breakthrough*. Thomas had published books before related to his academic specialty in comparative religions, but he had not yet done much publishing on Earth consciousness and spirituality. As editor of the GEA publications I had the pleasure of preparing Thomas’s articles for print. Thomas was not egocentric or hesitant about someone else editing his work (I rarely had to suggest any changes because he wrote so clearly, but sometimes we had to shorten an article to fit in the available space). He seemed detached from his work once it

was written and did not pursue publishing or writing for fame or profit. It was quite the opposite. Sometimes I called him when I was envisioning a coming issue to ask whether he had written something we could include. More than once he responded, "Let me look, I may have put something in a drawer somewhere that you might want to use." Only later, encouraged and helped by friends, did he pull his scattered articles into a book entitled *The Dream of the Earth*. A number of the chapters in that book had first been published by GEA.

In both his writing and speaking Thomas packed huge ideas into densely packed sentences and paragraphs, assuming that readers could grasp it with little or no elaboration. This made editing his work difficult, especially if something had to be cut to fit available space; it was not possible to remove a single sentence for fear of losing a key idea. It also made editing his work a great learning experience. I had to read everything carefully several times to make sure I fully understood all it contained. In the process I was entering into the mind of a very profound thinker.

Although profound, Thomas was not the most eloquent or accomplished of speakers. He usually looked in the air rather than at the audience when he spoke, as if he was communicating with God and the angels and not mere mortals. Nor did he start with jokes, honorifics, thank you's to the organizers, or other niceties to ease his audience into his presentation. More often he jumped into the middle of a difficult issue or concept, and the material was so compact that the audience had to struggle to understand. After one such presentation at a GEA conference in St. Paul, a local participant, who had heard him for the first time, passed me a note that read: "Put that into a ten-second spot for the evening news!!!" Although not all people understood Thomas on their first, second or even third hearing of a talk, they were always riveted by his presentations. That is because he spoke from a place of deep truth and wisdom, and never left an audience feeling manipulated; he always respected and challenged them and took them to a deeper place of knowing self and Earth.

GEA undertook many programs during almost four decades of existence and always included an ecological component rooted in new consciousness and spirituality of the Earth. However, we were also intent on activities aimed at changing global policy and building global systems that flowed from this deepened consciousness. Sometimes I would call Thomas to ask what he thought of a new undertaking that we were contemplating, including when we launched our 1980s initiative for an Earth Covenant that led eventually to The Earth Charter. Thomas was often wary of projects that would consume a lot of time and energy to coordinate. He felt the real revolution, and most important action, was to deepen human consciousness. From deepened consciousness people were more likely to

develop their own best practices. Or at least that is how I understood what he was saying. I liken this insight and prescription to that of Arne Naess, the father of deep ecology, when he called for developing a deeper sense of “self” or identity that included not only an *ego* self, a *social* self, and a *metaphysical* self, but also an “*ecological*” self.¹

What does this mean? Elsewhere I have written that for me it means “a consciousness that one’s own being and humanness emerges from and dwells in the being of the Earth, and that our life and choices have meaning for the further stages of Earth’s development as well as for our own development and fulfillment. Learning to embrace one’s deeper ecological self means growing in awareness of self as an actor or subject in the Earth community with responsibility for the consequences of one’s choices and actions on the life of the Earth. This is self-love but it is not selfish; it is self-love rooted in deepened understanding and appreciation of the value and meaning of one’s own human existence as inseparable from Earth’s existence. Understanding and embracing one’s ecological self includes a consciousness of not only how one’s own life and choices are interactive with other humans, past, present, and future, but also interactive with all other beings in the wider community of life. Rather than being a burden, added to layers of local, national and cultural identities, such a deep sense of self and community can help to heal the alienation and isolation and brokenness of those who feel separated and disconnected from life. It can free minds and hearts now entrapped by fear of “otherness” and open them to a sense of their unitiveness within the community of life. That I am not alone in the universe, that I am part of a larger being of life, opens the way to a sense of inclusion rather than fractured existence and isolation, to greater compassion for self and others, to greater inner peace, and yes, to gratitude and joy.”²

I am not aware that Thomas Berry has ever written explicitly about the need for developing a sense of an “ecological self,” but for me he embodies this deepest sense of self. This deeper sense of self is implicit throughout his thinking and writing. I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to journey with him and his work at this profound time in history.

¹ Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” Fourth Keith Roby Memorial Lecture in Community Science delivered at Murdoch University, Australia, Mar. 12, 1986.

² Patricia M. Mische, from “Educating for Peace and Planetary Community at the Level of our Deep Humanity” in *Global Education Associates, Breakthrough News* (Oct. 2006), 5-9.