

Seducer

Robert C. Neville

Dear Thomas,
 What a seducer you are! Do you remember the time in Collins Hall at Fordham when we were standing next to one another in the Men's Room and you asked me what I was teaching that semester? I said, "History of Philosophy" and some other courses. You asked what texts I was using for Chinese and Indian philosophy. I was speechless, because, of course, I was teaching only Western philosophy. Obviously, I had not thought of China and India as having relevant philosophies, except perhaps in the vaguest and most neglectable of ways. While still speechless, and before I had a chance to zip, you signed me up to teach a course on Indian philosophy and another on Chinese philosophy. Too young and full of myself to admit that there was something I could not teach, I began to teach those courses and still teach that material forty years later.

You had more scruples than I, to be sure, and had a bad conscience about having me teach what I knew not. So, a couple of years later, you encouraged me to study taijiquan, which I did for twelve years, and then taught for ten; I still have a private pupil or two. And then you signed me up to study Chinese language with Madeleine Chi, at Manhattanville College. I was a lousy student of the language, but have used the Chinese name she gave me ever since, Nan Lo Shan. One of my books is translated into Chinese and gives only my Chinese name. You are responsible for that, and for the honorary doctorate I have from the Russian Academy of Sciences for my contributions as a contemporary Confucian philosopher. Thank you.

When I went to SUNY Purchase, a number of students asked me to teach ancient Indian philosophic texts. They all had gurus in New York and were more interested in personal moksha than learning about the texts. So I told them they should learn Sanskrit first. They said to get them a Sanskrit teacher. I said they had to guarantee 20 students. They found 22. Of course we had no money for a Sanskrit teacher, so I went to you. You taught me how to teach Sanskrit, keeping four weeks ahead of the students—we used Gonda for grammar and Perry for the Devanagari. Knowing that a Sanskrit student pays a teacher with firewood, I gave you (and your Center) my copies of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, which I presume are still in that library. With your encouragement I taught the elementary grammar, a course in the Gita in Sanskrit, and a reading course in the Upanisads, also in Sanskrit (with heavy use of English translations); this went on for two years. Then my conscience finally came to life and persuaded me that I would no more be a Sanskritist than a Chinese philologist; I stopped the pretence of those courses and taught only with English texts. But one of those early Sanskrit students, Bill Borman, went on to Columbia and received a Ph.D. in Sanskrit studies. Perhaps you did not realize you were responsible for that.

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Meanwhile, your own interests encompassed much more than my education. In those days you were becoming a “geologian,” a theologian of the Earth. I have mimeographed copies of some of your early writings on those topics. And then you became THE Thomas Berry, mentor to all the ecologically minded thinkers in American religious traditions. What a difference you have made to so many people! My friend Mary Evelyn Tucker says she owes her whole career direction to you.

You have been a good friend to Beth and me, and to our children, who are now grown two children of their own, plus a husband each. I remember vividly your presence at our parties on Yonkers, where you walked from your Center. You didn’t act like a Revered Doktor Vater, or a Creative Philosophic-Politico Genius, both of which you were. When people asked what order you belonged to, you said, the Order of Drunken Priests. You must be a direct descendent of the Seven Drunken Poets of the Bamboo Grove. Elegance and ecstasy, you shepherd of the Earth, you!