

## Generosity

Dennis O'Hara

By the mid-1990s, I had been studying Thomas Berry's work for five years under the guidance of Professor Stephen Dunn at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto. Each year, the Elliott Allen Institute for Theology and Ecology, which exists within the Faculty of Theology at St. Michael's, and the Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality, which was located near Port Burwell, Ontario—both directed by Passionist priest, Fr. Stephen Dunn, hosted an annual lecture and colloquium with Thomas Berry, so Tom's work was becoming increasingly familiar to both students and public alike.

In 1996, Stephen Dunn invited five of his students who were seriously engaging Thomas Berry's work to present a brief public lecture of their research, with Tom in attendance. I can't speak for the other presenters, but I was more than merely nervous. I had been considering how our understanding of spirituality and the spiritual dimension of human health would be altered if we seriously accepted that the universe had had a psychic-spiritual dimension from its inception, especially if we understood human health to be derivative from and formed by cosmogenesis and integrally dependent on Earth's health. With a prior career in healthcare, I had been drawing on healthcare research as well as works in theology, ecology and the new cosmology.

My thoughts were still in a rather nascent stage, so I was apprehensive about making any public statements, especially before Thomas Berry. It wasn't that I thought he would be a severe critique, since I was already quite familiar with his warm hospitality. We had, by that time, shared several breakfasts together since we were both early risers on the colloquia weekends. (He was also one of the last to go to bed each night, a feat of endurance that annually amazed those who regularly attended those gatherings.) I was familiar with his gracious and gentle ways. Nor was I afraid of embarrassing myself by presenting nonsense or confused ideas. I just wanted to do justice to his work. If my thesis was to be associated with the work of Thomas Berry, I didn't want to be a poor representative of his insights. After my presentation, Tom not only offered enthusiastic encouragement, but also relevant sources that might help me further develop my ideas. Not surprisingly, I was both relieved and very appreciative.

This vignette illustrates two dimensions of my experience with Thomas Berry: his generous giving and an enabling of self-articulation. About a year after my presentation, I was chatting with Tom during one of his many visits to Toronto. He had just finished a conversation with Jai-Don Lee, another doctoral student, during which they had discussed Asian mysticism and the texts that informed the same, referencing those texts in their original language! I was dumbfounded, but when the discourse

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was ripe for a new direction, I managed to articulate some questions I had regarding the *Riverdale Papers*. Tom wasn't particularly interested in my queries, but gave a sufficient response before handing me a floppy disc on which, he said, there were some articles that I might find valuable for my work. On the disc were two manuscripts. One would eventually become *The Great Work* and the other has been partially captured by *Evening Thoughts*. I was astounded, yet again, by such generosity, especially since my time in academia had taught me that academics zealously protect their unpublished writing.

But after some reflection, I became less surprised by his generosity although my appreciation was undiminished. A year earlier, three doctoral students (myself included) as well as a recent graduate, all of whom grounded their doctoral studies in Tom's work, had questioned Tom about his life. We wanted to know more about the man who informed our work. Tom gently chastised us, reminding us he himself was not that important; the great work was. The emphasis should be on doing the great work and enabling others to do the same. So, in hindsight, it was not surprising Tom made such a generous gift via a small floppy disc in order to help me with my thesis.

Tom's enabling of self-articulation has taken many forms. His work with the epic of evolution has provided a powerful and inspiring context for reintegrating ourselves into the universe story, seeking to live in ways that are mutually enhancing for us and the rest of the planet, and rediscovering the sacredness of creation. This context not only permits but provokes others to realize their role in the great story. It provided me with a meaningful context for my doctoral studies, for my work as an eco-theologian and ethicist, and, more importantly, for my life.

Since that tentative presentation over a decade ago, I have spoken to thousands of people about ethics, healthcare, eco-theology, eco-spirituality and eco-economics. In each instance, I begin with the universe story and use Tom's work as the foundation for my talks and lectures. Professionals and consumers with an interest in healthcare are invigorated by an understanding of health that includes ecosystem health and that recognizes our profound connection with Earth's evolution and well-being. Educators who want to teach their students about the environment with more than scientific notions are grateful for ways of listening to the voice of Earth as our primary educator. Graduate students from the Americas, from Africa, Europe and Asia are able to use their doctoral studies to reclaim the religious wisdom of their bioregions and to bring it into dialogue with Western theology, the new cosmology, and the contemporary issues that imperil their homes. Through the corporate social responsibility pro-

gramme at St. Michael's, business leaders are gradually awakening to the implications of the epic of evolution, although somewhat more tentatively than the other groups mentioned.

In each instance, people are able to use Tom's reflections on the universe story to find their own voice, their own response to the profound issues of their lives and times. They can move from the "bovine placidity" and indecisiveness that demarcate so many of our lives to a reinvention of "the human, at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience." They invariably experience an awakening, a joy, an excitement, a relief of finally returning to a home that seems both familiar and new. The new story, as a context for understanding who they are, how they came to be, and where they might go, reinvigorates their lives because now they are players in that story and not mere spectators. The excitement and relief that I experienced many years ago, mixed with tentative first steps, marked a new beginning for me, just as engaging the epic of evolution through Tom's work has become a landmark for so many others.

Changing lives for the better is not a trivial matter, nor should one be cavalierly named as the agent of such change. But in the case of Thomas Berry, the declaration fits well. It is with the deepest affection possible that I acknowledge the generous gifts that Thomas Berry has given to so many, myself included. Like the cosmogenic principle of the universe that celebrates the self-articulation of every subject within the story of cosmic evolution, he has enabled us to find our own voices in ways that not only join the voice of Earth but that awaken us to our role as the self-reflective consciousness of the universe story. That is, indeed, both a great work and a great gift.