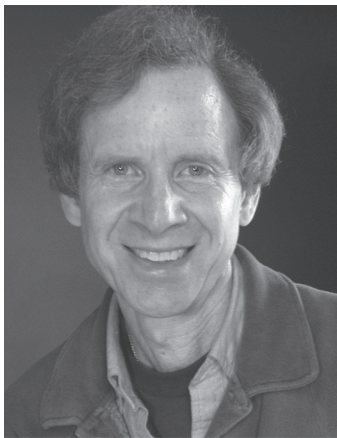


Thomas Lighting the Way

Marty Ostrow

Marty Ostrow is the Director of Fine Cut Productions, LLC, an independent documentary film production company, based in Cambridge, MA. He has been making award winning television documentaries for more than twenty-five years. His award winning films include *Thomas Berry Speaks*, *Renewal*, and *America and the Holocaust*.



I can't say why, but as far back as I can remember I had always been an observer and a seeker. More comfortable at the margins, standing apart and looking in, trying to grasp the deeper meaning of what was playing out before me. (Not an unlikely beginning for a future documentary filmmaker.) In my late teens and into my twenties, I had some deep foreboding instincts about our separation from nature and the assault that modern industry and technology was waging on the natural world. But those instincts provided no more than isolated flashes of brief understanding that frustratingly never added up to a coherent picture of the universe and how I—how we all—fit into it. Then, one day in 1978, a friend handed me an essay called “The New Story,” by Thomas Berry, a writer I did not know—and suddenly there was context—for *everything*.

It is no exaggeration to say that through the past thirty years, the vision and wisdom offered in that essay—along with Thomas's other writings that I would come to know—have illuminated a holistic meaningful path for my life and work. Without question, Thomas, by elucidating the Great Work of our time, has been the inspiring force for the long journey that led to creating *RENEWAL*, our ground-breaking documentary about America's growing religious-environmental movement.

In the way that a great symphony can unlock deep personal truths at the profoundest of levels, Thomas's writings are revelatory, connecting you with ideas so archetypically embedded and true that you feel you have always known them—yet you could never have accessed and articulated them on your own.

Thomas' ideas about our integration with a numinous emergent universe, our need to re-examine what it means to be human at a time when we now possess the ability to destroy the very life processes of the planet, his suggestion that a field of lilies—Earth itself—can become our best teacher and guide for salvation—these and many other ideas, were pivotal influences that opened a long quest that would eventually take me to *RENEWAL*, a film about people of diverse religions who are reclaiming their humanity and reinvigorating their faith by establishing a new way of living with the Earth.

It was Thomas who inspired me as a filmmaker to think differently about the environmental crisis. In 1989 when I was asked to make two one-hour films for the ten-part PBS series *Race to Save the Planet*, I was bound by the constraints of the programs that took a techno-science approach to the subject. While it became an important milestone television series, the first to bring environmental devastation to wide public attention, for me, making the films was also an exercise in frustration. Thomas's writing had made me aware that a much grander statement needed to be made about our primary human spiritual connection with the natural world. But at that time, the executive producers of the series were intent to cast the films

purely within a science framework. In subsequent years, my desire to fulfill the statement that had *not* been made, only grew stronger.

It was Thomas's all-encompassing vision of the human stance in the universe that inspired the series of Religion and Ecology Conferences at Harvard in the '90s, organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. I attended many of those sessions and they further fueled my urge to make a film about this vital intersection of the spiritual and the natural world. In subsequent years, a way to do the film would become clear, as I began to hear reports about ordinary people of diverse religious traditions who were taking action at a grassroots level to rediscover their relationship with the planet. Not surprisingly, many of these people had also been inspired by Thomas Berry and they were courageously taking on his challenge to re-examine what it means to be human in an interconnected universe. In the end, over the course of several years, my colleague Terry Kay Rockefeller and I had the privilege of filming many of these people and it's their stories that are told in *RENEWAL*.

But as I stop to reflect on the diverse influences that Thomas has had on me, I find myself always drawn back to that first essay I read, "The New Story," and its brilliant hologramatic statement of Thomas's concerns. In that one writing, he stunningly simply deals with *everything*. He describes our civilization's dysfunctional predicament, suggests how we came to be entangled in it, and he offers a remedy for the future that incorporates liberation and hope. Each time I read this piece I'm thunderstruck by how gracefully he weaves magisterial intellectual structure with deep compassion. An argument that might have been only analytical and arid, never strays far from a heart-felt plea for the well-being of children and the fate of future generations:

Children who begin their Earth studies or life studies do not experience any numinous aspect of these subjects. The excitement of existence is diminished. If this fascination, this entrancement with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.

Bringing personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe—that is what we *all* need, and through Thomas's insight, the path for accomplishing it is compassionately set out in his writings.

As I and so many others today are following a road toward re-defining who we are, let us joyfully celebrate Thomas Berry for lighting the way.