

Falling in Love with Thomas Berry

Shirley Pevarnik

It was the summer of 1996, and I was standing in the kitchen at the retreat center when I heard someone say that Mary Margaret Howard, a long time friend of Thomas Berry, was going to the Toronto Airport to pick him up. He was to be the main focus of our summer Colloquium at the Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality in Port Burwell, Canada, a beautiful retreat center on the northern shore of Lake Erie. The possibility of going with Mary Margaret to pick up Thomas suddenly hit me so hard I shocked myself when I heard my voice say, “Hey, do you want someone to come with you?” Dead silence, at least it seemed that way to me. Then I heard the voice of Anne Lonergan, one of the directors of the Holy Cross, say, “Good idea.” My life was about to change.

I had fallen in love with Thomas long before I met him. Friends had shared with me his books and videos, and I felt like this great man had saved my life or at least my soul. I had been working in social work for many years, and when you see the pain and poverty and the slow process of shift in our thinking, you get very frustrated and wonder about the human condition. Most of my peers had simply decided that humans were basically greedy and evil, but somehow that just didn’t feel right to me. So when I finally heard Thomas talk about the crisis of our time being a real crisis of story, it made so much sense to me, it gave me back my hope and changed my life. I pretty much gave up social work and went off to learn as much as I could about this *New Story*. I spent four summers at Holy Cross studying all I could, and I eventually got a Masters in Creation Spirituality with Matthew Fox and studied with Brian Swimme at the California Institute for Integral Studies in the Bay Area. Now I was about to meet this great man, the man who had changed my life.

Anyway, back to my story about Thomas and the airport. Mary Margaret and I were waiting for Thomas at the airport and she decided to go to the ladies’ room, so I was waiting for a man I had never met before, by myself. I saw a sweet man slowly coming down the ramp carrying a medium sized black brief case. (I later found out it held all he needed for the week, including a few books) I waved to him and he waved back. He came right up to me and gave me a big hug and kiss. Wow! was I surprised, flattered and felt an amazing sense of acceptance I couldn’t explain. When I finally calmed down, I realized he probably thought I was someone else or was pretending to know me, just in case he had forgotten me. Now after almost 13 years of getting to know this amazing teacher, I understand he was just being who Thomas is—a totally gracious, generous, Southern gentleman who would never hurt anyone’s feelings. And that feeling of acceptance I felt, well it has grown more and more over the years, not only from his acceptance, but more through my learning how thoroughly I really do fit in and belong to this larger story, this Earth, and to my world.

Shirley Pevarnik is a long time student and friend of Thomas Berry who studied with Thomas, Brian Swimme and Joanna Macy and received her MLA in Creation Spirituality with Matthew Fox through Naropa University. She has facilitated many groups on Earth Spirituality and the New Story, including an EcoZoiic group she established in Tucson. She teaches English (and hopefully sacredness for the Earth) to GED students, and she is deeply involved in community building in Silver City, NM.

My friend Becky and I have done a pilgrimage to North Carolina every year for the past nine years to visit Thomas. He has shared with us the creeks where he played in his childhood, the house he grew up in, the lake he where he pondered on the night before he told his family he had decided to become a monk, and yes, the field where the sight of the beautiful lilies changed his life (and ours). We have often shared apple pie à la mode with three spoons at the Green Valley Grill, his favorite place to eat in Greensboro. But our favorite time with him is when he shares his vast knowledge with us and gives us renewed hope of what the human can be in this amazing unfolding adventure called the Universe. Always, I walk away with that deep feeling of acceptance. But my personal all time wonderful memory is when we hold hands. It has become our bond, this hand holding. Even when we hang up the phone we say “I will always remember you holding my hand.” Again I am left with this deep feeling of acceptance and belonging. I am renewed once again to continue my amazing journey in and as this unfolding Universe.

My favorite saying by Thomas: BBC asked, “Thomas you are getting old; where do you think you will go when you die?” He thought a while and answered, “I will be where I have always been, in the Universe.” Yes, Thomas, we will hold hands always in the Universe!



Thomas and Shirley Pevarnik. Photo by Caroline Webb.