

Gazing into the Heart of the World

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*...I entered the life of the brown forest,
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone,
I felt the changes in the veins
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we have our own
time, not yours; and I was the stream
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and I was the stars,
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit; and
I was the darkness
Outside the stars, I included them, they were part of me. I was mankind also,
a moving lichen
On the cheek of the round stone...they have not made words for it, to go behind
things, beyond hours and ages,
And be all things in all time, in their returns and passages, in the motionless
and timeless center...*

—Robinson Jeffers, “The Tower beyond Tragedy”

On my first vision fast, at age thirty, I camped alone in remote, trail-less wilderness high in the northern Colorado Rockies. For five early-fall days, I dwelled in silence at a jewel of a lake set in a blue-green spruce forest a few hundred feet below timberline. Above the trees, craggy granite peaks soared into the sky like silver arrows.

Several precious hours each day, I sat in a small meadow and gazed out on the lake and at a particularly majestic spruce on its shore. The spruce stood with astonishing grace and serenity. It, too, gazed upon the lake but also, it seemed, far beyond it—deep into the heart of the world. It seemed to comprehend the world, and to belong to it, in a manner I had previously not known possible. I became aware I was in the presence of a consciousness both wild and wise.

During the first three days of my fast, my emotions and imagination progressively opened to my new home of rock, water, forest, sailing hawk, elk song, and stars. By the afternoon of the third day, my perception had shifted dramatically. Each thing—each mountain, wildflower, marmot—had grown radiant with a vibrant loveliness, ablaze with its own peerless character.

On the third day, I noticed for the first time that the lakeshore spruce was clothed in a vivid and luminous blue-green robe. The tree's entire form now appeared fully fleshed out as if its branches had enlarged and its needles thickened. And, in an extravagant act of generosity, the spruce revealed to me its true identity. At last I could see this was no mere tree—in fact, not a tree at all, at least not in the way we normally think of trees. Here was a monk, a sage and solitary contemplative who had been living for decades at this mountain lake and emptying himself into the world.

I watched the monk hail the beavers of the lake with a nod, his gesture returned by the splash and slap of a beaver tail.

The astonishing thing at the time was not that the spruce appeared to be a monk, but that I had previously mistaken it for merely a tree.

Genuine elders—sages—are very much like that tree-monk: graceful, wise, serene, wild, and generous. Among the very few such elders I have met, Father Thomas Berry stands out. Like the tree-monk, he seems to have accomplished the task Einstein recommended to us all: “to free ourselves from this prison [of imagined separateness] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

In the spring of 2006, when Thomas was ninety-one, I had the great privilege of spending two days with this ecotheologian (“geologian,” he says), at his residence in Greensboro, North Carolina. My goals in meeting with Thomas were to better understand the nature of true elderhood and our current time of planetary transformation.

A quarter-century before meeting Thomas—on my fourth day at that high mountain lake—the tree-monk lifted his arm and pointed to his left. Following his gesture, I turned to see a yellow butterfly meandering in my direction. When it reached me, the butterfly brushed my left cheek and whispered my name, my true name, revealing something of the gift that is mine to carry to others.

In a similar way, I have come to understand Thomas as a monk who, for more than thirty years, has been speaking the truth of our collective human name. A genuine Earth elder, Thomas has illuminated our responsibilities to this world and the sacred gift we, as a species, might contribute to the universe. Like an emissary from the heart of the world, he has welcomed us home to our true community on an enchanted blue-green planet within a boundless universe, after an exile of five thousand years or more—since the beginnings of Western civilization. Like all true sages, Thomas celebrates the mysteries of the universe and reminds us of our collective place in the cosmos.

In Thomas’s words—both spoken and written—we find a discerning and inspiring portrait of human potential and an ardent articulation of the splendors of the Earth and cosmos. Nowhere have we been given a more fierce description of the perils and sorrows of humanity’s current course, or a more hopeful portrayal of the fulfillments of a future human-Earth partnership that we might yet create together.

As would be true of any genuine elder, Thomas’s wisdom and leadership are recognized cross-culturally. Years ago, after having spoken to a gathering of native peoples in Canada, one of the tribal leaders said he had never before heard a white man speak with such understanding of and compas-

sion for indigenous peoples. At the end of the gathering, they turned to him and called him “Grandfather.” Thomas told me, “I always thought of that as one of the most wonderful moments in life—to be called Grandfather.”

For many indigenous peoples, the words *grandfather* and *grandmother* evoke the spirit of what I mean by *elder*. It’s not a reference to a person of a certain age. It doesn’t require that a person have grandchildren (Thomas, a monk, does not). Any adult in any culture recognizes a true elder. If you’re a grandfather in one culture, you’re a grandfather in any. Grandfathers and grandmothers belong to Earth and cosmos first, a particular culture second.

A genuine elder possesses a good deal of wildness, perhaps more than any adult, adolescent, or child. Our human wildness is our spontaneity, our untamed vitality, our innocent presence, our resistance to oppression, and our rule-transcending vivacity and self-reliance that societal convention can never contain. We are designed to grow deeper into that wildness as we mature, not to recede from it. When we live soulcentrically, immersed in a lifelong dance with the mysteries of nature and psyche, our wildness flourishes. A wild elderhood is not a cantankerous old age or a devil-may-care attitude, nor is it stubbornness or dreamy detachment. Rather, the wildness of elderhood is a spunky exuberance in unmediated, ecstatic communion with the great mysteries of life—the birds, fishes, trees, mammals, the stars and galaxies, and the dream of the Earth.

During my long conversation with Thomas, the wildness, passion, and mystery of his thinking at first surprised and delighted me. Later I remembered that such mystical motifs are strewn like exotic seeds throughout his books and talks.

The pleasure of Thomas’s company arose as much from his warm and gracious presence as it did from the provocative ideas he shared with me. Having suffered a stroke two and a half years earlier, Thomas had moved into an assisted-living community. Arriving for our first visit, I climbed a flight of stairs, turned toward his room, and there he was, ambling with his cane in my direction, despite his advanced years and the pain entailed in walking. Mindful of our meeting, he was on his way to greet me, which he did with a beaming smile, a melodic “Hello!” and a hearty laugh conveying the sort of delight one might have imagined to be reserved for old friends.

My first question for Thomas was “What’s the difference between old age and elderhood? What makes a person a genuine elder as opposed to an adult?”

After chuckling a bit at the scope of such a question, Thomas began by distinguishing scientific thinking from cosmological thinking, the former having “lost” the universe—“a sacred communion of subjects,” in his words—and having replaced it with a mere “collection of objects.” Cosmology, in contrast, *celebrates* the universe. Then he defined adulthood

as “the capacity for conscious presence to the universe and for a human personal response to the universe.” He told me stories about coming of age in early-twentieth-century America, noting that he “grew up with the universe,” whereas now children grow up without one because neither science nor religion “have a universe.” He then segued to thirteenth-century Europe and the profound significance, at that time, of Thomas Aquinas’s embrace of Aristotle over Plato. Then an explanation of why “the difficulty of the modern American world is that only humans have rights,” and some additional points about the Bible, the loss of cosmology, the nature of childhood, and the significance of imagination. All these and other points along the way were organic components of his final summation of elderhood—seventy minutes later—as “the easing of the tension of opposites in favor of identity or the serenity of fulfillment.”

His answer to each of my questions had a similar quality, a vast perspective I believe to be characteristic of true sages. It was as if he received my question, extracted its essence, filled the entire room with the kernel of my inquiry, and then infused the whole building with it, in fact all of the Carolina piedmont and, finally, the universe. He held my questions in such a boundless context—as if each answer began among the galaxies—that at times I wondered if he had understood what I had asked. But soon enough it became evident he was simply starting with the big picture, and gradually he would return to the heart of my question. By then, I knew he had not only understood my query but had understood it in a bigger way than I had asked.

Thomas emanated warmth and humor throughout our time together despite troubling stretches of pain, difficulties finding the right word or remembering a name, and initial bewilderment over my challenging questions. His easy laughter, often at himself, wove in and out of our conversation. Yet although humble and gracious, Thomas is not falsely modest. At one point, in the midst of his explanation of the role of sacrifice in Buddhism, he interjected, “My book on Buddhism, I claim [*laughter*] as a *really good book*. I’m not always proud of my books, but my book on Buddhism, I *like* that book!”

I was reminded—and am again now—of the true elder’s distinctive blend of guilelessness and wisdom, and of his easing of the tension between the apparent opposites of enthusiasm and nonattachment.

A sage experiences all of creation as “his” in the sense that the universe is his primary felt membership. He has gone “behind things, beyond hours and ages, / [to] be all things in all time,” as the poet Robinson Jeffers writes. Or as Einstein puts it, he has widened his “circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

The vitality and ongoing evolution of the whole—for example, of Earth as a living being—has for the sage a distinctly higher value than the survival of any of its components, including any of its particular peoples, institutions, or nations. To some, this position might seem to lack compassion, but the sage lives from the awareness that all things suffer or perish if the whole is harmed. Thomas writes, “We have to get used to the idea—and this is bothersome for many of us—that the integral Earth is more important than single humans; in other words, the community of the planet Earth is primary and the humans are derivative. If we do not base our way into the future on this insight, we will not survive.”

As I imagine any sage would, Thomas embraces the universe—the natural world in its widest expanse—as the primary guide in life and as the principal source of personal revelation. Throughout our interview, Thomas—a Catholic monk for more than seven decades—spoke cosmoscentrically. For example:

The Christian world has been focused on the Jesus experience. And since the discovery of printing and the availability of Bibles, it has been focused on the biblical revelatory tradition. Now, however, we need to move from that to the revelation of the natural world. In fact, I think the universe is the primary guide for everything in the universe, and particular for the human project. The planet Earth, for example, is the primary source of food, the primary source of intellectual development, the primary guide in government. It’s basic to everything and all the professions. It’s the primary educator, the primary religious experience. So, everything from here on needs to be seen in this new context.

When I talk about the Great Work of the twenty-first century, it is to restore the significance of the universe in the human project and the meaning of the human project within the universe project.

The individual human ego does not disappear until death, but, for the sage, the ego experiences itself, consciously and persistently, as an agent or handmaiden not merely for soul but for spirit, which is to say, for the universe. The sage’s existence, like Thomas’s, is informed by the cosmos.