

“Is That Your Father?”

Ted Purcell

The picture of Thomas sits in my home office on the top of a bookshelf, next to that of my granddaughter and beneath a large map of the world. Adjacent to the map is the Native American flute given to me for my 55th birthday by a Cherokee medicine man, Hawk Littlejohn. There are stories attached to each of these items; but in recent years several visitors to my office, noticing the photo of Thomas and rightly assuming that this is someone who is special to my life, have said, “Is that your father?” The first time this happened I said that he was not my father, then went on to identify him as a “geologist” (theologian of the earth) who has lectured widely and written on the intersection of cultural, spiritual, and ecological issues. Several times since, I have answered the same question with both a “No” and a “Yes.” No, Thomas is not my biological or adoptive father. “Yes, Thomas is a father to me in the sense of a mentor and a spiritual guide whose loving wisdom has had a profound effect on my vocation for more than twenty years.”

My first live exposure to his thought came when I heard him speak in 1987 at the first gathering of the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, where one of the ways he got the attention of this once-Southern Baptist was to suggest that Christianity is too preoccupied with personal salvation, too focused on redemption. At the time I had no inkling of what mind-stretching and imaginative insights lay beneath his heretical-sounding comments, or how the wisdom I later came to discover in his thought would help me appreciate how Thomas was calling for a conversion in the human relationship to Earth.

One might say that Thomas was presenting to me in his own unique way a gospel that would enable me, in the language of my own tradition, to make a connection between “being saved” and “saving Earth.” He was inviting me to surrender myself to a transformative process which requires the “re-invention of the human” in terms of our role within the sacred Earth community; he was inviting me to enter into a more mutually enhancing relationship with our endangered planet.

Some months later his brother, Jim Berry, himself a passionate voice for Earth, arranged for Thomas and me to visit at Jim’s home in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was pondering a momentous decision to abandon the safety of my full-time position as a campus minister at North Carolina State University—a position I’d held for 15 years—for a half-time position at Duke University, I shared my process of discernment with Thomas: I would give up half my salary to buy back half of my life; in exchange I’d have more time to devote to the vocation of caring for Earth. He listened patiently, asked a few questions—the only one I can remember is “What are you reading?”—and confirmed me in my desire and intention to follow

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my calling.

Soon after coming to Duke in 1989, I invited Thomas to speak on campus. A few years later, I extended a second invitation. In the spring of 2002 he returned for a lecture series on “The Role of the University in Human-Earth Relations.” In a Harvard lecture six years earlier Thomas had said: “The university, as now functioning, prepares students for their role in extending human *dominion over* the natural world, not for intimate *presence* to the natural world. Use of this power in a deleterious manner has devastated the planet. We suddenly discover that we are losing some of our most exalted human experiences that come to us through our participation in the natural world about us.”

Well-ensconced here at Duke University, I was clearly a part of the system—and, therefore, part of the problem. What could I do to change things at Duke? Open yourself to opportunity, and it presents itself. The Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences had been a sponsor of Thomas’s visit. A conversation with its then dean, Bill Schlesinger, led to my proposing a course for graduate students that would explore the fundamental and compelling question inspired by Thomas Berry, “How may we as human beings develop a mutually enhancing relationship with the Earth?”

The course, “Spirituality and Ecology: Religious Perspectives on Environmental Ethics,” was offered for the first time in the fall of 2002 and has been offered annually since. In the classroom experience and beyond, students are encouraged to examine and clarify the basic values, assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that underlie our human relationship with the natural world. Special attention is given to the evaluation of religious and spiritual values, concepts, and practices in light of the ecological crisis of our time. A regular feature of the course has been to include a brief introduction to the thought of Thomas Berry.

Although students in only one of the classes actually took a “field trip” to visit with Thomas in his Greensboro home, their weekly journals, classroom discussions, and environmental ethics papers reflect their wonder and appreciation for this “student of Earth and the human condition.” When these students—all of them already committed to environmental professions—view *The Great Story*, a documentary about Thomas, his suggestion that “the universe is not a collection of *objects*, but a community of *subjects*” comes as a startling invitation to them to embrace Earth more intimately than science alone might allow. It begins to register that ecology alone is not the answer, because it too is a “use” relationship to the natural world.

They hear Thomas describe his boyhood experience of a beautiful meadow at age 11, and they marvel at how this became, for him, “the basic de-

terminant of my sense of reality and values. Whatever fosters this meadow is good. What does harm to this meadow is not good.” Thus, he argues, “A good economic, or political, or educational system is one that would preserve that meadow, and a good religion would reveal the deeper experience of that meadow and how it came into being.”

I am not surprised, then, that when these students attempt to articulate the basis of their own environmental ethic and their understanding of their vocations, they connect them to their own experience of beauty in the natural world. As the poet Rumi wrote: “Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

After 19 years on the Religious Life Staff at Duke, I serve now as advisor to a new student organization, the Interfaith Dialogue Project, and as a mentor-facilitator for Duke Chapel’s Pathways Program for vocational discernment. The particular focus of the Pathways group in recent years is how spirituality inspires, informs, and motivates the calling to an environmental vocation. As an elder who can “retire” from this work at any time, I too am in regular discernment about what is next, beyond Duke.

I sometimes wonder what business I have teaching this class—a campus minister, not an academic, with precious little science background, and old enough to be the grandfather of most of my students. Perhaps what the Talmud says is true: “We teach best what we most need to learn.” Certainly I learn from my students; mostly, however, I am inspired by them—inspired by these mostly twenty-somethings who open their hearts and their minds as they prepare for vocations of caring for Earth; who tell their Earth-connecting stories to one another and share their numinous experiences at the risk of being identified as “nature mystics”; who discover anew that “feelings,” not just “facts,” are a valid part of their vocational equipment. Why am I teaching this course? Part of the answer is in the joy of helping to introduce Thomas Berry. While I make no claim to representing adequately or even understanding the enriching profundity of his thought, I gladly and audaciously claim him as a mentor whose inspiring life and vocation fills my heart with thanksgiving.

And yes, the next time someone notices his photo on the bookshelf in my office and says, “Is that your father?” I will say “Yes,” and tell the story again.