

Encountering a Sage

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I came to the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco for **one** thing, and one thing only: To learn enough Chinese to read the *Ta Chuan*—the Confucist Great Commentary on the *I Ching*—and to write a Master’s Thesis on it. Well there was another *small* thing that drew me: Brian Swimme had his center for Science and Spirituality there in some upstairs office and I was a fan of *The Universe is a Green Dragon*. But of course that was unrelated to my *real* reason. Or so I thought.

Soon after I arrived, Brian’s center was changed to the Center for the Story of the Universe. It seemed like an awfully long name and I hadn’t figured out quite what it meant. The following year, Brian gave his first course at CIIS—“The Cosmology of Science.” It was a revelation for me. And I now understood “The Story of the Universe”: It was the subject of our text, *The Universe Story*, written by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry. The class met at night, and I can still remember standing on a corner after those classes in the Haight, waiting for the bus, in animated conversation with other students filled with the light of discovery and Brian’s passionate teaching of Our Story.

One dark and stormy night, Brian opened his class with the cryptic comment that we *might* have a visitor. (Brian likes suspenseful surprises.) About halfway through the class, I saw a figure coming slowly into focus out of the darkness of the hall. I was sitting opposite the open door and had the only clear view of an elderly man approaching. As he entered the room his head was bowed and he seemed a little out of breath from the climb up the many stairs. I wondered what could have brought him out on such a night to such a place.

“Welcome Thomas!” A murmur of enthusiastic greetings rose in the room from the people who recognized him. “It’s Thomas Berry!” my neighbor explained. Brian led him to an empty seat next to mine and I watched him covertly with concern as he slowly got his breath back. Brian continued his lecture. When he reached a certain point, he said “Thomas, you can explain this better than I can” (that seemed impossible) and the guest rose and walked slowly to the front of the room. His head came up and his voice rang out loud and strong and I was reminded of those old shape-shifting Greek gods who were one minute disguised as old men or women, and the next moment revealed as a youth of shining countenance. With sparkling lucidity, Thomas described the central problems of the age and a vision for the future, laid out as tidy as you please. It was breath-taking. My immediate thought was “Oh to have such visions of the future when I reach that age!” Most of us are irretrievably lost in the past in later years. Not Thomas.

Two years later, he paid another visit to Brian's class. This was a superb course on the Cosmology of Literature and we were doing Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Brian had certainly chosen well when he asked Thomas Berry to teach the class on the *Paradiso*. It was one of those consummate moments you never forget, when the subject matter and the person conveying it become inseparable. As an army chaplain, he had gone through the war with a battered copy of Dante's work in his back pocket that he pulled out to read to the troops at night. Imagine that! One of the things I especially remember from this long-ago class was his comment that Dante had in his head virtually all of the knowledge of his time, which he was able to bring to this great work. Years later, I realized that the description was apt for Thomas Berry as well. He brought a vast knowledge of his own world and its cultures to a different Great Work, which he describes in his book of that same name: "The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner...The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth." Thomas has been calling us to this work for decades. How prophetic it seems now.

From the *Ta Chuan* I learned that the essence of a sage is to catch the subtle beginnings of things, barely perceptible to other people, and to act on them then, avoiding the later unmanageable consequences. Sages are always prophets, not because they psychically see into the future, but because they are so observant and far-seeing in the present. It is 2008, and the Big Consequences of what Thomas observed long ago are upon us.

I fulfilled my dream of studying the *Ta Chuan*, in Chinese, under a true Master, Professor Yi Wu. I wrote, not a Master's thesis, but a Ph.D. dissertation on the subject. Only one thing had changed from my original plan. My classes with Brian Swimme had revealed a startling thing to me: Everything I was studying from the ancient and classical period of China—particularly Confucius—seemed to resonate with an emerging Western worldview and more specifically, the new cosmology of Swimme and Berry. The basic precepts of *The Universe Story* were such a good fit with the view of my ancient Chinese text that it became impossible not to think of them together. The title of my dissertation became *The Return of the Sage: A New Cosmology Meets the Way of Heaven and Earth in the I Ching*.

I admit that I had fallen in love with those ancient sages—the first sages of China and the *I Ching* sages (which included Confucius)—as well as the later eleventh century sages of the Sung Dynasty Neo-Confucian school who recovered the ancient wisdom and brought it forward into their own society. Then another unexpected thing happened.

I had decided to open the work with a quote from the early Book of History on the first sage-king, Yao (ca. 2200 B.C.). I loved Yao. I thought of him as the first “deep ecologist,” because he studied the relationship between *everything*, from the position of the stars, to the habits of nature’s creatures, to the habits of his own people, teaching and bringing them all into harmony with one another. He sent his brothers out to the four corners of the kingdom, ordering them, “in reverent accordance with their observation of the wide heavens...to deliver respectfully the seasons to the people” (through adjustments to the calendar). He exhorted them “respectfully to receive as a guest the morning sun,” and sent them off with the words “Go and be reverent.” Oh he was a great fellow! And before I knew it, I had chosen a counterpart to this wonderful quote with which I opened the “Western section” of the work. It was Thomas Berry talking about Dante in the opening of *The Dream of the Earth*.

The world of life, of spontaneity, the world of dawn and sunset and glittering stars in the dark night heavens, the world of wind and rain, of meadow flowers and flowing streams, of hickory and oak and maple and spruce and pineland forests...all this, this wilderness world recently rediscovered with heightened emotional sensitivity, is an experience not far from that of Dante meeting Beatrice at the end of the Purgatorio, where she descends amid a cloud of blossoms...The “ancient flame” was lit again in the depths of his being. In that meeting, Dante is describing not only a personal experience, but the experience of the entire human community at the moment of reconciliation with the divine after the long period of alienation and human wandering away from the center.

I had found my matching sage from this postmodern era. You must understand that I don’t say this lightly. The Chinese sages were exceptional beings indeed and appeared only at rare moments in history. To come upon one was rather like finding a unicorn.

When I began my study, the word “sage” was almost never spoken in our society and my theme was that we did indeed need a return of the sage in the profound meaning of the term applied in China. Now, many years later, the word sage has come forth, almost fashionably. (That’s always a bad sign.) There are circles of sages, panels of sages, meetings of sages and an appreciation of “wisdom” has happily had a renaissance. Nevertheless, a unicorn is a unicorn and is not likely to replicate in numbers at the Bronx Zoo. To have glimpsed one in a lifetime...

The Neo-Confucian sage, Cheng I, was asked this by one of his students:
“In the school of the Sage (Confucius) there were three thousand followers. Only Yen Tzu was said to love learning...What then did Yen Tzu alone love to learn?”

Cheng I said, “Learning the tao of becoming a sage.”

“Can one become a sage though learning?”

He said. “Yes.”

“What is the tao of learning?”

“The tao of all learning is to ‘rectify one’s mind’ [hsin: heart-mind] and ‘nourish one’s nature.’ That is all. When you are centered, correct and authentic, you are a sage.”¹

Cheng I makes it sound simple, but if it were, more than one out of three thousand students would have understood it. Reading this, I was reminded of the Buddha’s Flower Sermon, when instead of speaking, he held up a single flower and only one student “got it.” And *that* reminds me of something Thomas said on that dark and stormy night: “Perhaps we should get rid of all of our books for a while and go back to studying the original book of nature.”

After the class on Dante’s *Paradiso*, Brian invited us to join Thomas in the cafeteria to ask questions and continue our discussion there. It stands out as an emblematic moment of the best of my years at CIIS—what it must have been like in China during the Sung dynasty, or Florence during the Renaissance, or Concord in the 1840s or Paris in the 1920s. Ever thoughtful and attentive to his students, Brian went among us as we left class, encouraging us to ask questions of Thomas relevant to each of our interests. “You should ask Thomas any questions you have about China,” he said to me. “He spent many years there and has a great knowledge of it.”

Well that clinched it. Thomas had read the same beautiful works and more in the original language. I learned later that he also read Sanskrit and was steeped in the wisdom of India. He understood perfectly what a sage was and like the true Chinese or Indian sage, would never have thought of himself as one. But to me, he certainly is.

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Now, it is this troubled summer of 2008 when the news events are always parceled out with the key word “Crisis,” whether the subject is the economy, housing, energy, climate or the environment. Yet to enter Thomas Berry’s small room at the Well-Springs Retirement Community in Greensboro, North Carolina is to be drawn immediately into a state of

¹ Kidder Smith Jr., Peter K. Bol, Joseph A. Adler, and Don J. Wyatt, *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 152.

peace. He is sitting in a chair, wrapped in a blanket, waiting for me. “We are looking forward to your visit,” his sister Margaret Berry had told me by phone that morning. “You know, both Thomas and I taught the *I Ching*.”

I had come to pay tribute to Thomas for the gift he had given me. So rich and immeasurable. A sage like Thomas gives you a universe, an entire new place to be in and a new way to be in it. “You’ve brought your dissertation?” Yes, I said, drawing up a chair close to his so that our knees touched and I could lay out the unwieldy thing I had spent four years writing. “I want to read to you about Yao,” I said. “I think he was the world’s first ecologist!” There was an appreciative chuckle. I read the opening passage and paused over my favorite lines like “receive as a guest the morning sun,” and Thomas would throw his head back and laugh with delight at each one. Oh, it was wonderful! A perfect reward for all the labor: Yao and Thomas and I in this precious moment together.

Then I thumbed through the pages to read him the matching quote that introduced the Western section. “The world of life, spontaneity, the world of dawn...” He smiled as I read. Then we talked. Here was Thomas, fourteen years after his visit to Brian’s first class. He was now a 93-year-old man—post-stroke, pausing when gaps struck and he reconnected his thoughts—but speaking with the same calm clear vision of the past, the present, the future. “What do you do about the frustration of losing thoughts or not being able to read?” I asked with concern. “I’m not frustrated,” he answered, and I knew it was true. When I asked if perhaps he might recover some of those capacities in time, he shrugged and said “I’m declining,” as he might say “It’s raining.” Then he pointed to the nearly completed manuscript of his new book on the table beside me. Thomas has said all along that nature is our truest teacher: Things grow and blossom and decline and pass away. At least physical things. But what makes Thomas who he is and will continue to be is that imperishable thing that lies beneath it all and can be given freshly, any day, as the true gift. Thomas’s “great work” has just begun, and we are all in it as are our children.

I came to the California Institute of Integral Studies to learn enough Chinese to read the Confucist Great Commentary on the *I Ching*. And there I encountered, not one unicorn but two: Master Wu from China, and Master Berry from Greensboro, North Carolina. What an enchanted world I had found myself in! I can only think of one thing to do with such extraordinary blessings.

Go, and be reverent.