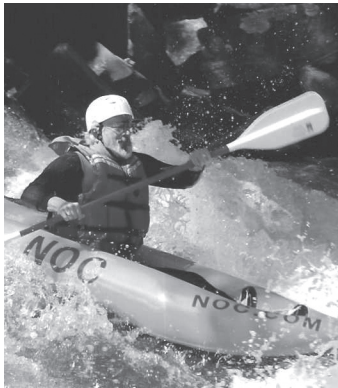


Universe as Poetry

David Schenck

Dr. David Schenck, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Vanderbilt University Medical School and consultant to a wide variety of nonprofits in the Southeast, following a 20-year career as a professor of philosophy and religion. His books include *Zchenk Among Demons*, praised by Iris Murdoch as "a deep and stirring book;" its companion, *Z. Coming Home and other poems*; *Cold Morning East* and *The Mythographer of the Sun*.



Wonderment. Delight. Mystery. A mischievous grin. That rueful chuckle over the ways of the world. And an enormous loving heart. No one I have ever met manifests the Divine Child archetype of dancing wholeness as fully and as beautifully as does Thomas Berry.

For Southerners, it's still startling—disconcerting even—to discover that an internationally-known, world-class thinker has grown up in your hometown. Or maybe it's just that Greensboro, North Carolina, never struck any of us young scholars as a likely incubator for intellectuals, much less prophets. I first heard of Thomas from one his nephews who'd grown up in the same neighborhood as I did, and went to the same Boy Scout camp. Both Frank and I were then going to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as undergraduates in the early 1970s. Knowing I was majoring in religion, he told me he had an uncle who'd written some interesting things on Asian religions and Teilhard de Chardin. I gladly accepted the large pile of those ancient blue mimeographed sheets Frank offered me. These essays would have been written well before the classics that became *Dream of the Earth*, and made Thomas a leading figure in the development of world-wide ecological consciousness. But I was transfixed then by what I had been given, especially the Teilhard papers.

It was the late 1990s, after he'd moved back to Greensboro, when I finally met Thomas face-to-face. After much of that inspired intellectual—indeed wisdomatic—teaching that characterized encounters with Thomas, we got around to talking about our hometown. And we discovered, among many other family intertwinings, that he had delivered newspapers to my grandfather's house when he was a boy. We also discovered we had walked in north Greensboro along the same creeks and through the same wood as boys—he in the early 1920s, and I in the late 1950s. Local to global and back again. Future to past and back again.

Most will know Thomas as an innovative thinker, a compelling teacher, a philosopher, a prophet, an ecologist—and rightfully so. That encyclopedic knowledge, coupled with an incisive mind. But when I think of Thomas now, of what he has meant at this critical juncture for the development of the human, I think of the renewal of the poetry of the world—the dreams of the greening Earth, the Ecozoic arising, as a blossoming of the poetry that is the universe itself.

Thinking this way, I take Berry up with Aquinas and Dante, the two figures who are his deepest inspiration and nourishment. Dante's willingness to look into the darkest darkness, to suffer purgation, to be carried by and to divine presence. Aquinas as celebrant of nature as bearer of revelation, alongside scripture. And Aquinas and Dante together as teachers of analogy in its grandest sense. Yes, analogy as a form of argument, and

thought and disquisition in Aquinas. Yes, analogy as the methodology of allegory and symbol in Dante. And thus language itself as fundamentally analogy. Which opens into the ontological aspect: Being as analogy. Each being an analogue to, with, for all other beings. Which is how there can be “difference” in a universe, and how there can be a universe that allows the bonding of “one other” with “another other” to form community. Non-identical beings joined together to create that intersubjectivity which, according to Berry, constitutes a universe.

And then if analogy is poetry, and poetry is analogy—as Thomas has often said to me—then Being itself, the universe itself, is fundamentally poetry. This is not the place to make a full argument. Only to sketch out a promising line of inquiry and to acknowledge and celebrate the richness of Thomas’s great work that offers us so many ways to traverse our mysterious world. Where else is there a mind that offers this much room to explore, and such a generous invitation to shared discovery? How astonishingly blessed we are to have known such a person, to have shared this tiny sliver of the eons with such a remarkable soul.