

Thomas Has Been a Mentor of Imago Since Its Beginning

Jim Schenk

Jim Schenk is an environmental educator, community organizer, and cofounder of Imago, Inc. He is organizer of five EarthSpirit Rising national conferences on Ecology and Spirituality, and a resident of the Enright Ridge Ecovillage in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Eileen and I began Imago (www.imagoearth.org) in 1978 as an educational organization. As social workers, we came to believe that most people, not just the poor, were unhappy in this culture. We began Imago with the idea that if we helped people find a sense of happiness, we would be dealing with the issue of poverty as well. We concluded that we are *culturally* disconnected from each other and that the isolation is incredibly harmful. Our culture says we need lots of stuff, but our basic needs, once we have the necessities of life, are to love and be loved, to care and be cared for.

At this time Joyce Quinlan moved into our home. She was working on her doctorate on ecology and spirituality at Union Institute. She began bringing books home by people such as William Irwin Thompson, and David Spangler. She even brought home Thomas Berry's "blue books." Very quickly Eileen and I became aware that we aren't just disconnected from each other in this culture, but from Earth itself. Imago changed its focus and became an *ecological* educational organization, exploring how we would live if we held Earth and its people as sacred, if we had this as a priority.

Joyce left us in 1979 and went to Chinook Learning Center, which had established a relationship with Thomas Berry. Through Joyce, we became more familiar with Thomas.

In the mid 1980s I invited Thomas to offer a workshop at Imago. But Imago was an unknown entity then, and he didn't accept. About that time I got to know Jim Berry, Thomas's nephew, who was the director of The Cincinnati Nature Center. We decided that Imago and The Cincinnati Nature Center would hold a joint workshop if Thomas would agree to speak. He accepted our invitation, and our association with Thomas began. From my personal experience in listening to Thomas's presentations I observed:

- He was not a great orator, but what he had to say was so engrossing it really didn't make any difference.
- He never repeated himself. He always had new insights that helped me deepen my own awareness of our interconnectedness with Earth.

By March of 1993 we had concluded that Imago needed not only to be an ecological educational organization, but also needed to "walk its talk." To begin this, we planned a workshop here in Cincinnati with Thomas, his brother Jim, and his nephew Jim. Thomas and the two Jim Berrys accepted our invitation to meet over breakfast to discuss the idea of developing our neighborhood to be an eco-neighborhood. Twenty of our neighbors joined us for the breakfast, but at the last minute the Berrys fell sick, and couldn't

join us. They needed to recuperate so they could do the workshop later that day. We proceeded without them and it was at this breakfast meeting that we began the eco-neighborhood project which has now evolved into the Enright Ridge Urban Eco-village (www.enrightridgeecovillage.org).

One of the high points I personally had with Thomas was the interview I did with him at Imago's "EarthSpirit Rising" conference on Earth Elders held in 2002 in Black Mountain, North Carolina. I was putting together a book called *What Does God Look Like in an Expanding Universe?* (published in December 2006, www.imagoearthpublishing.org). I asked Thomas to speak about the three issues the book deals with: Where Did We Come From, Why Are We Here, and Where Are We Going (after death). I was honored to have him share his insights with me, and I am honored to share them with others through the book.

Since 1979 Thomas has been an important person in Imago's life by helping to lead us in developing Imago as an ecological educational organization. He has been a great support. I do not hesitate to say that Thomas's insights and support over the years have been key to Imago's successes.