

Standing with the Greatest

Alan Shephard

“Earth has lost one of her greatest voices,” wrote Miriam Therese MacGillis last week. Oh, yes indeed. ‘One of Earth’s greatest voices’ is a ringing phrase to savour for evermore, a most apt description and a deeply perceptive placing of Thomas Berry in the scheme of things.

It is an honour to be asked to make my tribute to this most kindly voice of wisdom. I am an English bookseller working in the general area of eco-spirituality. Well into retirement now, I have gradually, so gradually come to appreciate the huge importance of this great man—so much so, that when asked, “What is the most significant book you sell?” I have no hesitation whatsoever in answering, “Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work* by far.” The other books and DVDs by Thomas are also propagated with great pride and joy. This is an especially important mission in UK, where his insights are largely unknown or unheeded outside the green movement. There is so much to do! In one of our précis of *The Great Work* I described him as “standing with the greatest.”

I met Thomas just once, in 2003, when he visited London at the invitation of the Gaia Foundation. It has remained a treasured occasion ever since. When we were alone and he asked what I did, I shyly showed him our modest mail order catalogue and he said, “Gee, may I keep this?” Now I am not normally given to adulation, but here felt so honoured. What a man!

Here in UK, Thomas made a notable visit to the unique Schumacher College a few years ago where he addressed a conference at Dartington Hall. Last year we (GreenSpirit) felt inspired to mount a special day in his honour in association with Schumacher UK, the Gaia Foundation, and the journal *Resurgence*. Staged in central London with the title “Earth is Community,” four speakers of international repute including Matthew Fox eagerly came to pay their tributes from their various perspectives. It was a most joyous day, well recaptured on DVDs from www.greenspirit.org.uk/books.

Whilst every page, every paragraph and often every sentence of his writings deserve much meditation in order to realise the deep significance of what he is saying, he has provided so many memorable seeds of contemplation for daily use. I particularly like “Gardening is active participation in one of the most sublime mysteries of the Universe.” Another insight which I carry constantly nowadays is the idea of a yardstick. His yardstick of Earth centredness, of eco-centrism, getting away from the all-pervading human centredness, of anthropocentrism has become my yardstick too, against which I tend to measure every proposition and every human institution. Thank you, Meister, SO MUCH!

So we will surely hold him gratefully and forever in our thoughts, as solid and as stolid as the mighty red oak at Riverdale under which he stood. In that sense, too, he truly stands with the greatest. Just as Julian of Norwich the English mystic spoke of “being enfolded in love,” so may we feel enfolded in the benign and utterly wholesome insights of Blessed Thomas. I love him dearly.

Alan Shephard is co-owner, with Tony Jarrett, of GreenSpirit Books and Schumacher Book Service, a not-for-personal-gain book-recycling enterprise with a focus on eco-spirituality. Profits go to help the environmental charities GreenSpirit and Schumacher UK.



Alan Shephard with Thomas