

On a New Road

Patricia Siemen, O.P.

Thomas Berry ran me off the road—almost literally—and then set me on a new path. More than two decades later, through my work with the Center for Earth Jurisprudence, I hope to derail others as benevolently.

I first met Thomas Berry twenty-five years ago when he spoke at the Center of Concern on global development issues; at the time, I was living in Washington, D.C. as a law student intern in the Voting Rights Section of the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. I remember returning home that evening chewing on Thomas's bold assertion that the human population was exceeding the carrying capacity of Earth and that we had a moral and ethical obligation to limit human population for the sake of a viable planetary future. I had not yet ventured into considering the global limits to growth, but I remember knowing in my gut that Thomas's words made sense. I was pleased he had the integrity and internal freedom to say publicly what needed to be considered for the larger common good.

On a road trip years later, a friend and I listened to tapes by Thomas in which he argued in favor of a constitutional amendment to protect the rights of all members of the natural world. We needed a democracy that included the voices of all the species, he said. If all the species of the planet had a right to vote, he suspected they would vote humans off the planet because of our solely human-centered approach to economics, law and governance.

I nearly drove off the road. I had truly never thought beyond an anthropocentric perspective. My entire worldview had been shaped with the belief that humans were the most important and central beings in creation. What did he mean by giving voice to the other species?

The seeds of Earth jurisprudence were planted within me. Thomas's *The Dream of the Earth*, published in 1988, became a foundational reading for me. I began reflecting on my understanding of the role of the human within the larger Earth community. The idea that "Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" became a sustaining mantra for me and a directional compass in my life. Seeing Earth as a living being, a self-organizing, self-sustaining, self-regulating and self-transcending organism with an inherent capacity for inner knowing, spontaneity and increasing complexity had guided my life and work. I found myself drawn to consider the Universe's principles of diversity, communion and interiority, and the experience of them in my own life and relationships.

In 1999 I had the opportunity for formal study at the Sophia Center, Holy Names College, where I delved into Thomas's newly published book, *The Great Work*. There I began to grapple with the re-visioning that would be needed for law and governance—as well as for formal education, religion and economics—if these were to allow, and indeed encourage, all members of the natural world to exist and to flourish. As I studied

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Thomas and Pat, August 2008

Thomas's writings on the spirituality of Earth, I began to grapple with his articulation that Earth and the Universe were the primordial, phenomenal source for all of our ideas and experience of the holy, or sacred, mystery. Thomas's teachings taught me that our formal religious traditions have all emerged from various human experiences of the sacred mystery called by many names. Earth, or the natural world, is the conveyer of numinous experiences and revelations of aspects of the divine. Thomas's writings and teachings about the spirituality of Earth and his critique of the major institutions of the dominant western culture were the bedrock of new philosophical framework for me.

After several years as the director of the Earth Ethics Institute, wrestling with incorporating Earth literacy and Thomas's core teachings into interdisciplinary courses at Miami Dade College, I was awarded a Marie V. Gendron Grant from the Adrian Dominican Sisters in 2006 to initiate the creation of a Center for Earth Jurisprudence (CEJ). This Center is a collaborative initiative of Barry and St. Thomas Universities in Miami, Florida. The Center is dedicated to furthering Thomas's ideas of creating law and governance systems that recognize the intrinsic value and rights of the natural world to exist, for species to have their own habitats and for all entities to flourish within the context of ever-renewing processes of Earth community.

As the recent adoption of the newly revised Ecuadorian Constitution (which incorporates certain constitutionally protected rights of Nature) demonstrates, Earth jurisprudence is a movement whose time has come. As the Earth community faces accumulated ecological degradation and limits to planetary growth, we know that humans must shift to ways of governing ourselves that support our interdependence with other species and inhabitants of Earth. Thomas reminds us that we have always been a single community of life and that our role today is to create mutually enhancing relationships with all the members of the Earth community. We are reminded that we have always been neighbors and kin to each other, as many indigenous and native peoples continue to live through their customary laws and practices. Now we Westerners must design laws that align with the laws of nature and respect the integrity and interdependence of all members of the Earth community. Thomas teaches us that Earth is our primary teacher and our law-giver. May we learn this lesson and tell her story for the sake of the future children of all species.

Thank you, Thomas, for being mentor, teacher, companion, and friend.