

Uncle Brother

Ann Berry Somers

In our family Thomas Berry is known as Brother or Uncle Brother depending on your rank. He is Uncle Brother to me. As small child I did not encounter him often. Occasionally he would come for a visit and, like my father's other brothers, was very sure of himself and his ideas. My mother explained he was a university professor, an important and noted thinker, and even wrote books. Wow. I didn't know anyone else who wrote books or had an uncle who thought great thoughts and, although I was very impressed by the achievement and regarded him with a certain fascination, it seemed we were worlds apart. My siblings and I were growing up in the country, swimming in the lake, catching bugs and turtles, admiring snakes, and generally living a life quite distant from a New York academic.

I am often asked today if Thomas Berry influenced my decision to work in the field of conservation, and the answer is no. But we come from the same place, I always say, we come from a family that has a place in their hearts for the wild and the wonderful. The woods and the lake around my childhood home influenced me more than my world traveling uncle who wrote about eastern religions and was a priest.

It wasn't until the late 1980s, when *The Dream of the Earth* was published, that I came under his sphere of influence. I read every word and then read them again. I was struck by his knowledge and understanding of science and the way this was woven into his inexorable commitment to a Universe of meaning and purpose. When Thomas moved to a small house on my parent's property in 1995, he became an active and caring part of our family and presided over family celebrations when he was not traveling. His octogenarian status did not slow him down. He accepted every invitation, gave talks, and attended meetings from coast to coast as well as overseas in Italy, England, and the Philippines. I was busy too, raising children, teaching full time, and was fully engaged in wildlife conservation in North Carolina. So, even though we talked quite a bit in those days, it was not until medical issues in 2002 forced him to slow down that we began meeting each Sunday morning. For more than five years now we have been exploring ideas on a weekly basis by means of conversation. I probe, challenge, disagree, and offer alternate views to elicit responses from him, which I faithfully record in my notebooks. No subject is off limits, no idea too sacred to confront.

Understanding Thomas at the deepest level takes time. Understanding Thomas at any level is worth the time. Of the many gifts I have received from him, one is an understanding of the order of magnitude of the events occurring at the present time, something that is apparent to historians more than the rest of us. I had long been teaching about historic mass extinctions, their ecological consequences and their recoveries in geologic

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time, including the one underway now for which we are responsible, but working with Thomas allowed me to realize the consequences for the human spirit, right here, right now. No longer vague about why I thought the human-Earth relationship must be elevated in our ranking of concerns, I understood the intimate connection between the two and was able to elucidate with conviction why it is important for restoration ecology to be considered of utmost value, deserving at least equal status with human-focused concerns such as social justice, peace, racism, and poverty. The teaching that “human well being is not possible on a sick planet” took on genuine meaning.

Another aspect of Thomas’s thinking became particularly important for me, the role of humans—a topic we biologists tend to avoid, at least in the classroom. We recognize that many of today’s ecological problems stem from our view of ourselves, the view that all of nature is solely for human benefit and that human welfare supersedes all others. Biologists concerned with ecosystems come to see the world differently; being clear about evolution, we know the facts don’t support a human-centered view. As keen observers of what is occurring in the natural world, we tend to focus on the destructiveness of humans and the ignorance that drives our species to crush the wildness and ask the natural world to succumb totally to the human world.

Nevertheless, when asked about the role of humans in the great community of existence we recognize the scientific answers, though indispensable in the pondering, do not satisfy. This quarry is more elusive. Yes, we are seed dispersers, predators and sometimes prey, parasite hosts, dam builders, and forest patch clearers enabling secondary succession. Though accurate and undeniably important, these descriptions are not adequate for satisfying our deepest yearnings. And, trusting only science, we assign this most important of questions to the area of our minds that we plan to attend to one day, or get to in another lifetime, and so turn our thoughts elsewhere. We bumble through when it comes up, and students, somewhere along the way, learn not to ask the question anymore, at least not in biology.

I recognize now that to consider the role of humans you must tell the human story, and that to tell the human story you must tell the Universe story. I see now that the human spirit, like everything else, is a dimension of the Universe. This should have been obvious to me, but it wasn’t. Now, *I* bring it up. When I get to the human part, I describe our biological features that are unique and relevant, and discuss the biological and ecosystem benefits we would have had early on, on the African plains of our origin. Ah, but much has changed in the short time that has since elapsed.

Although destructiveness emerged over time with our emigration and technological development, there is also the really good stuff. Like the fact that we tell stories and can see deep time; that we have discovered evolution and the unfolding Universe; that we behold the beauty and wonder of it all; that within the human lies the potential for behaving in many different ways and that the guidelines for living a richer, more benign existence are available if only we would avail ourselves of them. And, perhaps most importantly, that we feel a sense of profound gratitude. The great mysteries remain, but not drenched in the unbearable, rather in the joy of excitement and celebration. The Thomas Berry view allows for a more elevated view of humans than I had held previously, and a certain optimism. If I expressed optimism before, I was faking it. Now it is real. At least most of the time.

And so, by his work and by his great and gentle nature, Thomas Berry, my dear Uncle Brother, has brought a sweetness to my life, to the lives of so many others, and to life itself.