

Good Companions on the Way...

Mary Southard, C.S.J.

Mary Southard, C.S.J., is a life-adventurer whose fascination is the wonder and creativity of our Sacred Universe! As a visual artist she works in a variety of media—paint, plaster, fiberglass, clay, wood, cast paper, pastel—and is best known as creator of the Earth calendar which has been a favorite in homes around the world since 1980. Mary is also an experienced educator, retreat director, and a voice for Earth healing. Programs and retreats have taken her to sites in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia. As a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, Mary lives and has her studio in La Grange Park, Illinois.



I first “met” Thomas in the fall of 1980 while part of an unforgettable workshop with Pat and Gerry Mische of Global Education Associates. They had brought along some back issues of the GEA Newsletter, and one featured an article by Thomas called “Spirituality of the Universe.” I was ignited! Here I was reading about living in a sacred Universe, the experience of the Holy and a spirituality that I resonated with. I was hungry for more, and searched library catalogs for more of his writings, but could find nothing. That one article gave me the courage, the underpinning to move forward with its insights and my own convictions in my courses and retreats.

Fast forward to the summer of 1988. I was creating a calendar for 1989 titled “Song of the Earth” and wanted to include a quotation from that article. Dare I call him for permission? One afternoon I tracked down the number for Riverdale Center and dialed. Surprise: Thomas himself answered the phone! I introduced myself, and explained why I was calling. “Why of course you can...What kind of calendar is it?” he asked...“Song of the Earth? Well! I have just finished a book I’m calling *Dream of the Earth...*” He talked as if these were “companion” pieces, his amazing book and my little calendar; as if we were in this together. And “companioned” is how I felt after that conversation! We had carried on like two friends talking. Later I realized, that was his way...

Earth at risk got my attention in a radical way that year. I was caring for my mother in a cast from her waist down during one of the hottest summers on record in Chicago. We had a one room air conditioner in the house. Later I was about to visit Yellowstone when we were turned away because it was burning. The beaches were closed in Connecticut where I was doing retreat work because of medical waste being dumped into the ocean. And in January, the image on the cover of *Time Magazine* was not the customary “Man of the Year,” but “Planet of the Year”—Earth wrapped in plastic and tossed out on the beach with medical waste. When I saw it, something within me shifted!

That winter, I took myself to Holy Cross Centre in Port Burwell, Ontario, where I focused my calendar art and writing in a new way, tending to Earth’s suffering as well as her beauty. In May I returned there to participate in a new program, “Pilgrimage to Earth.” After many weeks of reading, study, doing the science, devouring videos of Brian Swimme and David Suzuki, participating in group reflection, outdoor contemplation, paradigm shifting, we were to attend the Centre’s annual “colloquium” that featured Thomas Berry.

On the afternoon of his arrival, we students were ushered in to meet him for a social before supper. I remember sitting on the floor during this first face-to-face meeting with Thomas. Suddenly, in the midst of whatever

was being talked about, he looked right at me, his blue eyes piercing, and asked, “Do you realize that we humans are bringing to an end a Geological Era, the Cenozoic?” The world of conversation stopped for...Silence. Then Tom began to elaborate. It was a new thought, a shocking insight, and it had our attention! I’ve often wondered if this realization had occurred to him on the long drive up from New York that day. It was an indelible moment of grace, catapulting me into cosmic time!

In the years following these first encounters with Thomas, whether during visits to Riverdale Center, or at lectures or planned events, I have always felt a personal closeness from him in which I am known, respected, challenged, affirmed, and cared about with affection. I have felt loved. As I met more and more people who have been similarly affected by Thomas’ presence in their lives, I began to realize that we, all of us, are family in a world where what we are passionate about had previously been invisible. Within us a “dream of the Earth” has been deepening as we have been growing in relationship and support of each other as we carry the dream forward, each of us in a multitude of ways. Geographical distance collapses in this family and our connections are strong and important to us.

Because of who he was/is, a contemplative living in a world larger than human constructs, a man who loved and believed in me, in us, in life, “in everything!”, Thomas thrust us into the profound realities of existence, right here, right now. His lifelong contemplation was gift—always exploring, ever more keenly aware, ever more able to articulate the magnificence of the Universe and the dimensions of human cultural pathology, he invites us to profound wisdom and creative response.

In Thomas I experienced a true friend, a gracious and generous elder, a man who has embraced in love each moment of existence. Because of Thomas I know that we as a species are on the way to becoming truly and fully human, that we are participating in the Great Story of a loving, evolving Universe, that we are living at the edge of a great Transformation. With Thomas, we are involved in co-creating a communion of life, a communion of love, a mutually-enhancing relationship with Earth and with one another.



Mary Southard at the Sophia Center, Oakland CA, July 2008.