

## Thomas in Situ

Charlene Spretnak

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To see Thomas Berry in Greensboro was to grasp yet another dimension of cosmological embeddedness. From the mid-1980s on, I had been fortunate to have had several luminous visits with Thomas in Riverdale—those long talks on the sun porch, the magnificent library, the “queen’s bedroom” to which I was wryly assigned, and the oak, his totemic oak. Then, in July 2004, I visited Thomas in Greensboro. I got the tour. Thomas and Margaret most graciously drove me all around their hometown—by their late-childhood home adjacent to a lovely woods, by the church, and to the Revolutionary War battlefield where General Nathanael Greene (nicely done in bronze) fought General Cornwallis’s army in 1781 and lost, but not without reducing the Brits’ southern army by 25 percent, such that Cornwallis was unable to prevail subsequently at Yorktown. We talked about O. Henry, who set out from Greensboro and spent some time in my hometown, Columbus. We didn’t whitewash: we went by the block downtown where the Civil Rights lunch counter sit-in demonstrations had occurred, an ugly ordeal, though not much was said about that shameful bit of the city’s history.

In the lovely neighborhood surrounding the Berrys’ former home, I could well imagine Thomas riding his bicycle, as he has described in his essays. By the end of the afternoon, I realized the obvious, which had escaped me all these years: Thomas is a Southerner. It had always seemed that he lives spread across the universe—but no, he received his spiritual formation from his beloved bioregion as much as from the Holy Mother Church. He carried with him always—to the Potomac, the Yangtze, the Hudson, and home—the presence of the Southern hardwood forest, the spring wildflowers, the dogwood, azaleas, magnolias, the soft breezes, and the lush green of the Piedmont.

We ended that memorable day with a leisurely dinner—or, I should say, “supper”—at the rather grand Green Valley Grill, a cavernous brick building decorated in “the 19th-century Tuscan Revival style typical in the Greensboro area,” as patrons are informed. In our booth, Thomas, Margaret, and I slipped gradually into, at least it seemed to me, one of those rare conversations around which the walls fall away and a graced space envelops the exchange. At one point Margaret cited, like an angel, “the bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.” Yes. Thomas was intriguing, as he so often is, but there was something different in the grounding of his being. He was deeply at home.

His influence is immeasurable, and to apply one of his favored criteria, it is unmistakably *vital*. I saw during that evening the answer to a question that dogs philosophy: how can we know that goodness and wisdom are inherent in the universe? Because Thomas Berry...is.