

## Changing the Context for Living in the 21st Century

Elaine and Nelson Stover

Elaine Stover's integrative work includes designing collaborative processes that combine the arenas of ecological intelligence, design aptitude and community participation or greenscheming. Over the past 30 years she has lived and worked in four countries outside of the US: Australia, India, Egypt and Belgium, where she worked with the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) to develop the Technology of Participation (ToP®) group facilitation methodology. She is a certified trainer and trainer of trainers in the Technologies of Participation (ToP®) and a founding member of the International Association of Facilitators.

Nelson Stover is a systems analyst, poet and teacher. He is currently a senior application specialist providing computer software to professional associations. He serves as President of the ICA International Board of Directors and has worked for years providing training in human development programs and lecturing internationally. A collection of his poems entitled *The Rocks Sang Om* was illustrated and published in Nepal and sold internationally with the proceeds being used for women's literacy training in the Himalayan foothills.



During the beginning of the civil rights movement in the mid-'60s, Elaine and I became aware of the pervasive scope of social injustice in the society in which we were growing up. We realized that some people were grossly mistreating others. We also came to realize that we, ourselves, were involved in the mistreatment. We joined with groups and organizations trying to eliminate this form of social injustice. In doing so, we discovered that the cultural patterns of society needed to be transformed. New words and phrases were required to describe people with differing skin colors and ethnic backgrounds. New patterns of behavior emerged among people with widely diverse heritages. Both of us found ourselves living and working in parts of cities that our parents were unwilling to visit—making friends with people our families had never encountered. This desire to directly confront the fundamental, underlying issues of the times in which we lived became a foundational pillar of our family as we worked in metropolises and villages around the world.

By the time we arrived in Belgium at the end of the '80s, we were becoming aware of a much more pervasive form of injustice plaguing Planet Earth. The actions of the human species were putting the planetary ecosystems in peril. This same set of actions and understandings, held predominantly by Western society, were also undermining the possibilities of addressing the social and economic problems of the poorest of the world's citizens. During this time, we encountered Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*. Planet Earth was envisioning, through Thomas's pen, a new way of relating to the human species. This Dream became ours, too.

We moved to Greensboro, North Carolina in 1991 and had the pleasure of meeting some of Thomas's relatives who also shared his Dream. They were beginning to give practical form to this vision. While collaborating with them on projects of mutual interest, we learned that Thomas would be moving to Greensboro. Since his arrival in 1993, we have had the distinctive honor of sharing with him the various events in which we have been involved and have talked with him personally about our concerns and ideas.

Over dinner one evening, Thomas observed that "The Universe is the text without a context." All other sources of wisdom and knowledge, he continued, must be understood from within the context they were written. The Universe is its own context as well as the context for all other discourse and understanding. With this simple insight, Thomas provided the key to understanding the global cultural transformation that would be required to meet the environmental and social challenges facing Planet Earth.

When the cultural history of the 21st Century gets written by subsequent generations, Thomas's role may well be likened to that of Copernicus in the 16th Century scientific revolution. Both changed the central

focus around which understanding and action are organized. By advocating a universe-referent framework of understanding, by making the human realm a component of the natural realm instead of the controlling element, Thomas planted the seed of the species-level change that he envisioned as the Great Work of this century.

Thomas's writings and the periodic conversations Elaine and I have had with him over the past 16 years have provided the inspiration and insight for continuing the cultural transformation work that we have been involved in over the past five decades. Thanks to Thomas, we now have the context of an emerging Universe in which to continue our work. From this perspective we can promote a solid foundation for comprehensive understanding, an ethical framework for social organization and reflective experiences that simultaneously makes sense of the times in which we live and ensures a long-term sustainable future for the generations yet to come.

Thank you Thomas for writing from the heart.