

Coffee with Pythagoras

Brian Swimme

“I’m having coffee with Pythagoras.” This was my first attempt to identify Thomas Berry some three decades ago. The notion came to me right in the midst of our conversation in the diner. Listening to him was to be transported into another domain of soul. It was not just that his knowledge was so vast. It was the evocative power of his presence. As you listened, you regularly found yourself in what is called an “altered state”. Quite literally, Thomas’s reflections on the nature of things would catapult one into the archetypal realms of classical myths and psychedelic dreams and the greatest philosophy and art. Everything became more real. You found yourself at the very center of the universe and you were given a vision of the inner harmony of things. Suddenly you knew exactly what you had to do with your life. As all of this was happening to me I thought of Pythagoras, that great sage of the ancient world whose spiritual impulse would become Western philosophy and science. I felt certain that the deep joy and wonder that were filling my soul were similar to what the students in Pythagoras’s mystery school must have experienced twenty-six hundred years ago.

That I would identify Thomas with a personality of the axial age—other notables would include Heraclitus, Confucius, Lao Tzu, the Hebrew Prophets, and the Buddha—that I would actually dare to locate Thomas in that rarefied company can of course be explained as an exaggerated enthusiasm accompanying an initial meeting. And indeed, as the years went by and I began speaking, teaching, and writing with Thomas, I did get to know him on a deep level, and in fact I did change my initial assessment of him. But in the other direction, my initial impression was too timid.

I came to the conviction that Thomas Berry is not just similar to Pythagoras or to Confucius or to Lao Tzu. Amazing to say, I came to realize that he was someone who went beyond them in important ways. He was, to my mind, a person in the very midst of giving birth to a new order of human being, an order made possible by the great teachers of history, but an order that was in crucial ways not available in the forms of consciousness found in the various world religions. A new, planetary mode of human being was emerging, one that was rooted in classical spiritualities, but one that reached back into the shamanic worlds and carried forward into the modern scientific forms of understanding. The entire human journey was undergoing a seismic shift and Thomas was aware of this and of his role in this transformative process.

In future centuries, many volumes will be written on the nature of this change in the structure of human consciousness that Thomas Berry both described and enacted. Future scholars will have knowledge that we do not have. Where today we can only intuit darkly that the transformation

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amplified by Thomas will lead to a vibrant Earth Community, they will know the overall effects of Thomas's life as historical fact. But what they will not have is what many of the writers and readers of this volume have been given—the actual, ineffable experience of having been in Thomas's presence. How they will burn in envy of us! To have actually had coffee with Thomas Berry! What amazing historic good fortune!

As an aid to these future scholars as they contemplate the significance of Thomas Berry, I would like to end by describing just one splinter of the form of consciousness Thomas awakened in us by his personal presence.

We all fell in love. With sunshine—with the rising moon—with the rainbow trout as they hover in the shadows of Chambers Creek. With everything. And certainly with each other. The awakenings took place in every imaginable event. While driving to New York City in his little Mazda. Or while sitting with some two dozen people in those uncomfortable plastic chairs of his Riverdale library, listening to a presentation. All of a sudden an energy would come sweeping into your body, filling every artery and bone until it could no longer be contained and just gushed out as radiance from our eyes. Everything, each person, is now exploding with beauty. You would find yourself simply overwhelmed with a desire to get married. With anyone nearby. Did I say anyone? I meant *everyone*. With the Great Red Oak sheltering the library. With the sky overhead. Such an idea made perfect sense in the form of human being Thomas awakened. That you'd marry the sky—that it would become your central devotion—that you'd dedicate your entire life to praising its nourishing beauty until everyone fell in love just as deeply as you.



Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry at the Cosmological Imagination Conference.
Photo by Caroline Webb.



Thomas Berry speaking at the Cosmological Imagination Conference, Berkeley, CA, November 2002. Photo by Caroline Webb.