

Introduction of the Honorary Chairman of the Greensboro Bicentennial

Carolyn Toben

Carolyn Toben is founder and board chair of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm in Whitsett, NC, a work dedicated to teachers and children based on the work of Thomas Berry. A former public, private school and college teacher with an emphasis on alternative and interdisciplinary education, she served for 18 years as a seminar leader at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching in Cullowhee and at the Center for the Advancement of Renewal for Educators (CARE), based in San Francisco. Carolyn has pursued post-graduate studies at The Jung Institute in Switzerland, The Institute of Creation Centered Spirituality in Chicago, The Guild for Psychological Studies in San Francisco and The School of Spiritual Psychology.

It is a deep privilege to speak of Thomas Berry, distinguished Greensboro native whose life and works have notably influenced the spiritual and intellectual history of the 20th and early 21st century.

Recipient of eight honorary doctorate degrees, the most recent from Elon University last month, Thomas Berry has received recognition all over the world for the depth and breadth of his work in bringing into consciousness a new vision of the human-Earth relationship. To name only a very few, he has been recognized by the United Nations, the Center for Respect of Life and Environment in Washington D.C., the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and the Roman Catholic Church for his outstanding contributions to peace and justice in the world.

Thomas has been called a monk, a scholar, a cultural historian, an author, an “Earth scholar” by the Greensboro *News-Record*, “a world leader in ecology and religion” by Elon University, and “the leading figure in a new breed of ecotheologians” by *Newsweek* magazine.

Through his writings and lectures he has sought to revitalize the major cultural institutions of education, politics, economics, and religion, and his work continues to generate creativity in the fields of art, music, dance and literature. At least seventy-one organizations, including our Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, which is dedicated to reconnecting children and teachers to the natural world, have been inspired by Thomas. These organizations are now working to meet the needs of the demanding times in which we live.

Thomas Berry’s story is a remarkable one of dedication and devotion. Born in 1914, the second in the Berry family of 13 children, by age 8 Thomas was already aware of the growing industrial world and its consequences for the Earth. He speaks of himself as a “brooder” and says he knew he needed to find a place to continue his brooding as he grew up. The only two places he could think of were a prison or a monastery!

Fortunately, he chose a monastery, entering the Passionist Religious Order at the age of 20. From that time forward, Thomas Berry’s lifework has been dedicated to helping us understand that the destiny of the Earth and the destiny of humans are inseparable.

Thomas tells of going to the monastery’s 2:00 a.m. prayer services, and then staying up the rest of the night studying and pondering the origin of man’s separation from the natural world. He sought knowledge, not for power or acquisition but for understanding, and he delved deeply into the foundations of Western and Eastern thought where he believed solutions could be found. His search took him to study and teach in China, eventually returning to the United States to teach Asian studies at three universities. He also served as an army chaplain in Germany. At Fordham University he instituted a doctoral program in the history of religion that integrated Eastern and Western thought.

In 1970, Thomas inaugurated the Riverdale Center for Religious Research in the Bronx, New York. For the next 25 years it was the base from which he further developed his thinking on the human-Earth relationship. It was here that he greatly expanded his international influence as a thinker, writer, and lecturer. The Riverdale Center attracted scholars and others from around the globe who were interested in rethinking their work in the light of Thomas's developing vision. (This is where I first met Thomas Berry on a snowy January morning 30 years ago.) Thomas also served for 12 years as president of the American Teilhard Association. In 1998, as part of Harvard's International Forum on Religion and Ecology, the Thomas Berry Foundation was established by John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, then professors at Bucknell University and now at Yale. The Thomas Berry archives are presently housed at Harvard.

Thomas's influence has been further expanded by his writings. In addition to the eleven-volume *Riverdale Papers* and religious writings, *Buddhism* and *Religions of India*, Thomas has authored *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story* written with Brian Swimme, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, and *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*. The last two books were published after his returned home to Greensboro in 1995.

Thomas Berry's lifelong work offers a deep vision that goes beyond simple economic, political, or environmental solutions. "What we are experiencing," he writes, "in the degradation of the Earth, is a soul loss, a loss of meaning in life itself that calls for a recovery of a sense of the sacred." Thomas believes that an inner shift must be made: "The Earth must be seen, not as a collection of objects for our use, but as a communion of subjects of which we are all a part." What this means is that we are not separated from the natural world but deeply interconnected in a sacred way. He says, "we are all part of a single community that will live or die together." He urges us to encourage young people on their own paths, not ours, and as he said to our young intern Jesse Towle, "Create a new century, Jesse." His major concern for the future has always been for the children, *all* the children, including those "who swim beneath the waves of the sea, to those who live in the soils of the Earth, to the children of the flowers or those who fly with the winds." For our human children, Thomas reminds us of their need to look up at the stars without light pollution, to play on the grass without pesticides, and to explore a real world of dawn and sunset, of sun and moon and the cycles of seasons, instead of a virtual world viewed on television and computer screens.

For all of us, as we move into an uncertain future, Thomas Berry gives us inspiration to feel the presence of a sacred universe that can sustain our human endeavors. We are deeply grateful today to Thomas Berry, our distinguished Honorary Chairman of the Greensboro Bi-Centennial.