

Conversations With Thomas Berry

Jessica Towle

By the time I was seventeen and was graduated from high school, I realized that humans had unintentionally split the world apart. I saw that the sacred had been taken out of the Earth, and the Earth had been taken out of the sacred. It was as if, for a period of time, my vision completely changed and all I could see was the pain of this reality. I liked to call it the great divorce, because I saw all splitting apart as coming from this source.

My intense need to reunite in myself that which was split apart led me to Genesis Farm, a Learning Center for Re-Inhabiting the Earth in Blairstown, New Jersey, not far from my home. What I encountered there was reconciliation—people working towards the union that I was desperately searching for. The more time I spent there, the more I heard the name “Thomas Berry.” I became curious about him because everyone there held him in such high regard and could easily quote clarifying things that he said in response to my questions. I was given a copy of his book *The Dream of the Earth* and, after making my way through it, I declared to myself that I would meet Thomas one day.

Two years later I found myself at a tree house watching an old man drive up in a beat up Mazda. I walked over, unsure who he was. He got out of the car and we looked at each other for the first time. We both started laughing right away, and then we hugged. I knew that it must be Thomas, and I knew at that moment that I had better do the listening instead of the talking. From the first moment I saw him I adored him. He had a graceful sparkle in his eyes, and his white hair was sticking up in the back of his head, like Einstein’s did.

The day I met him was an Earth Guides training at Timberlake Farm in Whitsett, North Carolina, not far from where Thomas grew up. There I was, a transplant from New Jersey, newly arrived in North Carolina at the invitation of Carolyn Toben, founder of Timberlake Farm. I had no idea that being at Timberlake Farm would actually mean entering a new life. The Earth Guides training was the beginning of a new way of seeing things for me. When Thomas started speaking I became transfixed. I had never heard anyone talk like he did before. I was entranced by his use of the English language, astonished at his clear thinking, and captured by the ease and grace through which he spoke his message. He was like a brilliant poet who had been given the task of elucidating a cosmological and historical understanding of reality.

Throughout my first year at Timberlake Farm, I spent a lot of time with Thomas. He inspired me in a way that I had never known before. He inspired in me the love of learning and with that came the desire to think critically, to educate myself, to look at history very carefully in order to see how Earth came to be as it is, and more importantly, how we came to think

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the way we do. For the first time in my life, I felt curious about history, and I no longer had to ask “Why is this important?” or “How does this fit into the larger picture of things?” Throughout all my previous schooling, I constantly asked these questions of my teachers who, for whatever reason, never had an answer for me. Being with Thomas was like discovering a secret treasure over and over again. His interpretations of things allowed me to start to see the world I inhabited in the depth of its meaning. The unfolding of his thought was the first true sharing of relevant intelligence that I had ever experienced.

In between our visits, Thomas would send me packages of books in the mail with enchanting little notes signed “Hermit of the Hills,” or “Hermit of the Wilderness.” He became more and more delightful to me every time I met with him, and as time went on I actually began to understand what he was saying. Each visit became its own breakthrough in my mind.

I’m not sure how the idea of writing a book with him came up originally. At first it was to be a biography and that idea eventually evolved into the notion of writing an intergenerational question and answer dialogue with him. Of course, I was convinced that I did not have the skills or the ability to do this, so my plan was to sit with the idea for awhile and hope that divine inspiration would come running in and help me write something beautiful about this man whom I adored so much. After a year in North Carolina, it became apparent to me I wanted a college education, and so I journeyed to Prescott, Arizona, where I enrolled in Prescott College. My conversations with Thomas would be long distance for a time and the idea of writing an intergenerational dialogue would be put on hold.

After two years of study and growing at Prescott, I knew it was time to return to North Carolina for an independent study semester at The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. In my absence, poor health had forced Thomas to leave his hermitage in the woods and move to an assisted living residence in a retirement community where his sister Margaret lived. When I returned, the time seemed right to take up my intergenerational dialogue with Thomas where we’d left off. I still didn’t feel that I knew enough, but Thomas said, “If you wait until you’re ready—one is never necessarily ready—you’ll be waiting for a long time.” With this encouragement, Thomas and I agreed to have weekly conversations.

What follows is an account of one of our conversations. In this ongoing exchange between my questions and Thomas’s reflections, the world has come back together again. My adolescent quest for a reuniting of the sacred and the Earth is fulfilled in a language of union and reconciliation offered to me by a wise and beloved elder.

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Today is Friday, April 9, 2004, Good Friday. I picked up Thomas from his new residence at Well-Spring Assisted Living Center. Well-Spring is a well-kept center that is probably a delightful place for most folks. Thomas says he doesn't mind it all that much. There are birds in big fish tanks and beautiful plants guarding each door. I have never heard him complain about it. I have never heard him complain about a thing in the four years that I have known him.

Before I knock at his door, I stand there and wonder what it will be like today with him. Sometimes he is tired. He has given a lot in this life. I knock and hear him call out for me to let myself in. When I open the door, he is walking towards me with his arms wide open, a smile on his face. "Well, it's good to see you," he says.

He looks tired today—really, really tired. He says "I'm afraid I am a bit of a bore today." It makes me laugh when he calls himself a bore. He is the most interesting person I know, yet I know he is serious when he says this. He looks at me as I am hysterically laughing, and he starts to laugh deeply and freely. I can see that this is turning into a wonderful moment as he suddenly declares, "Well, let's go to our place." He disappears into another room and I look around while waiting for him. I see a lone copy of an early book written by Thomas called *Befriending the Earth*. Thomas comes back into the room while I am carefully inspecting it. He tells me that I should take it. I point out that it is his last and only copy, not to mention that it is one of the only things in this room that is reminiscent of his life at the hermitage. He doesn't seem to care and tells me to take it anyway. We start heading out to the Green Valley Grille, which has become the setting of our conversations.

When we walk in to "our place," the hostess immediately ushers us to our usual booth and comments on the fact that she doesn't see a tape recorder today. I don't really like to record him any more. Although I always wish I had recordings later, my attention seems to drift to making sure the recorder is copying well, and so forth. I would much rather be fully present to the experience of being with him without any distractions.

We sit down in the big, comfy booth. The waitress knows to give us some time to chat before we order. I stare at Thomas from across the table. I become fixated on his eyes. He is speaking to me about something Aristotle said: "Beauty is an aspect of everything," he says, his words floating effortlessly, reaching my ears, registering in my brain. I still can't look away from his eyes. He is looking at me too, intently looking, as he continues by saying, "Aristotle says there are three aspects to everything in the universe: The One, the True and the Beautiful. Absolutely every living thing has this

and knows this. Every tree has this identity, every river, every mouse. Each of us articulates something unique in the universe. The challenge of the evolution of consciousness is to locate ways of thinking about the universe and also to locate distinctive ways of thinking of oneself. Self-reflective consciousness is the awareness of our own unique reality, as well as of the common reality that we share through the beauty of inner attractions.”

There is something precise about the tone and manner in which he speaks. There is thoughtfulness in how he pauses between words, remembering centuries of stories of people from every nation on the planet. He is someone who knows the stories of diverse peoples, how they came to be who they are. He not only knows their stories, but he can reflect the meaning of those stories within the larger picture. Thomas also knows the story of the universe and how it came to be, and how we came to be within it. He reveals so much with his careful articulation. He has put so much into the words he chooses to speak, and the silence that he speaks from.

After a while, our waitress brings us our usual soups and salads. Thomas starts to pick at his lettuce plate with his fingers. We both like to eat salad with our hands. There is something very natural about eating leaves that way. I say to him, in between heaping mouthfuls, “Thomas, it might take me a lifetime to live in the world that you live in.” He laughs. I then ask him, “Why do you think humans have evolved to have these capacities that we have?” He considers my question momentarily before replying, “We can narrate the changes of development from earlier forms, and the sequence of events, but we can’t say why. Our knowledge of the why is expressed through myths. Myths can explain why in terms of non-literal language. Children no longer get myths because they are considered unreal, but if they do not receive myths, they are missing the whole world of reality. Mythic reality can tell of wonderful and useful things. Science discounts myths because they cannot be proved or demonstrated.

Our waitress eyes us up closely as she walks past. She has learned to sense when to interrupt the conversation. Thomas continues by saying, “The sacred and the profound are best expressed through analogous language. Language creates reality. The idea is that we know more than we can explain. A mother cannot rationally explain her love for her child. Their mutual fulfillment lies in their capacity for intimacy with each other; there is no scientific explanation for this. The relationship is self-authenticated and self-explanatory. There is the science of it, but that is not what a mother is feeling or talking about.”

I, as I imagine a mother’s love for her child, understand what he means. Our waitress brings us more coffee, and we both pause. I imagine him

briefly, watching for almost a century, the effects of the rational-mechanistic worldview making its way into our relationship to the Earth, the economy, our ideas of love, and actually every other human venture. I imagine him watching so much of this go on in his own lifetime. I always wonder what makes a person stay awake internally. How did he do it? Why did he not get swept up in the reality of the time? Usually, when I talk with him, my own thoughts disappear and every word he says creates an image in my mind.

I go on to tell him that he lives in a different world than most, a bigger world, a world I can only imagine through the stories he tells. He replies, “Young people need this kind of world. If they get into a computer world too soon, they are deprived of the world they should be experiencing. We are not going to recover our ecology until we understand this.”

“Are you saying that our relationship to the Earth is directly connected to how we think?” I ask. He replies, “If we continue to build our world as scientific analysis and neglect the knowledge of imagination, art and the humanities, we will tend to see the purpose of life explained in scientific ideas of analysis and control. We need to keep myth because it is the only thing that makes life livable. Our children are learning to become mechanistic constructions, they are being taught to manipulate the area of human mechanical design and control. The children are saturated with mechanics, but end up with no poetry, no imagination, or depth of understanding.”

He pauses and looks at me and says, “Next week for homework write about how this is evident in society, and how thoughtful people are responding to it. Pay attention to what children are bombarded with, and pay attention to how they respond to places like The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Farm. How is the need in children being met?”

I start to imagine a few of the millions of ways that a child’s relationship to the Earth is marginalized. He continues by saying, “Humanity has undertaken three major shifts in thinking in terms of basic and primary referent. In the first age, the divine was the primary referent; in the second age, the human; in the third age, the Earth. Our fulfillment as human beings requires a threefold fulfillment.”

The integration of this threefold fulfillment is something he has been talking about a lot lately. He seems insistent that I get that idea, that I have a sense of what he means, but it’s not entirely clear to me yet. I make a note to ask him about this more carefully next time. I get the feeling it is important.

Our earnest and kind waitress returns to the table and sets out crême brûlée with two spoons. This has become a tradition with Thomas and me, and most wait staff at The Green Valley Grille are wonderful to remember

it. We always feel special when they do. He removes the cookie and puts it on the side of the plate. He picks up his spoon and removes the cooked sugar off the top, dipping right into the crème. He looks at me with regard and says, “I have watched the last century, you will watch this one. What I saw begin, you will see end. Create a century, Jessie.”



Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and Matthew Fox at the Cosmological Imagination Conference, Berkeley, CA, November 2002. Photo by Caroline Webb.