

Humble, Erudite Presence— Wide Impact

Franklin Vilas

I first met Thomas Berry in 1974, when he was President of the American Teilhard Association. I was President of the C.G. Jung Foundation in New York City. Mutual friends felt that the two of us had much in common.

Tom asked me to share a meal with him, and we drove to Bear Mountain Lodge, where an association began that has lasted over many years. As a result of our meeting, our two associations sponsored a conference in 1975 at the International House at Columbia University on the convergence of the thought of Teilhard and Jung, and a vision of an evolving universe that included the human psyche.

I spent many an afternoon and evening at the Riverdale Research Center listening to Tom as his thinking evolved and his vision moved beyond the boundaries of Teilhard's to encompass the modern ecological crisis. I wondered about the many piles of mimeographed papers on the shelves of the Center, and hoped that someday Tom would publish his thoughts.

I can recall sitting around a table in Rhinebeck, New York, at the Omega Conference Center with him and others, including Brian Swimme, and talking about how we might convince him to write a book. Thankfully, the Sierra Club came out with *The Dream of the Earth* some years later, and the vision of this humble genius began to be known by the wider public.

Although I was already deeply caught up in the vision of Teilhard of the sacred nature of the created order, Thomas was a mentor for me who helped turn this vision into ecological awareness. I watched over the years as other leaders in the field such as Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim and Daniel Martin experienced Tom's wisdom and carried his vision to the wider public.

In the 1980s, while serving as Executive Director of Wainwright House in Rye, New York, I was able to secure a major grant from another of Tom's admirers, the philanthropist Laurence Rockefeller, to sponsor a series of evenings that brought Tom into contact with CEOs in business, college presidents, religious leaders, and politicians.

Tom was his usual erudite and blunt self, raising the sights of these movers and shakers to the ecological crisis and what was becoming an increasingly unviable human species. They emerged from these meetings somewhat shaken, but with new insight and understanding.

Increasingly over the years I have found the name Thomas Berry appearing in books and the public media as a visionary whose image of an Ecozoic Era is accepted as the way of the future. It always amazes me that his humble presence near the great tree at the Riverdale Center has had such a wide impact on what is the most important movement of our day.

Franklin Vilas is an Episcopal priest and the founder of GreenFaith, a statewide New Jersey interfaith organization. A trustee of the American Teilhard Foundation, a president of the C.G. Jung Foundation, and an executive director of Wainwright House, he has been a friend of Thomas Berry's since the 1970's and has worked with Laurance Rockefeller to promote Berry's thought with leaders in business, education, religion and politics.