

His Shoes

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Sr. Gail Worcelo, S.G.M., is formerly a Passionist Nun who was taught by Thomas Berry during her novitiate in 1984. Since that time she has continued the journey with Thomas and with his support and guidance has co-founded Green Mountain Monastery and the Thomas Berry Sanctuary in Vermont. This new Monastery for the 21st century is dedicated to the Great Work of both inner and outer Awakening.



Thomas' Shoes



Bernadette Botswick, Thomas Berry, and Gail Worcelo

It was his pair of black shoes sitting in the corner of his room that caught my attention. I had just arrived for a visit at Well-Spring and Thomas was sitting in his chair, blanket wrapped around his shoulders, with a big welcoming smile to greet me. I walked over to him and we gave each other a long, tight hug.

“Pull up a chair,” Thomas said, “and face me.”

“There you have it,” I thought. “What else would he say to me after all of these years of bonded intimacy, of teaching and loving, laughing and learning?”

“Face me.”

These are the words of a Wisdom Master to his student in the waning years of his life. I could barely heed the request because of the extraordinary demand inherent in it.

To distract myself from the monumental task of honoring his request, I allowed my eyes to glance quickly back to his black shoes, stretched and scuffed in the corner. They were like two eyes, witnessing this moment, peering out from their vantage point in the room.

I knew these shoes well and the man who had filled them during so many walks and talks, dinners and visits.

I remember one particular time when Thomas came to visit us in Vermont during Mud Season. It was the month of March and we took him to our Benedictine neighbors, the Monks of Weston Priory to give a lecture. Thomas spoke on the theme of “Stabilitas”—stability, not in terms of the traditional monastic understanding of staying in place, but in a much more challenging frame. He spoke of stabilizing consciousness, of understanding ourselves in a new way as Universe beings and placing ourselves back into the Universe in this Ecozoic Era.

On our way back to the car, we had to slosh our way through the muddy road. Once inside our own house, I recall bending low, washing off the mud that had embedded itself on Thomas’s shoes. It was a significant gesture for me, one of humility and gratitude, a reminder of the great gift I have received in this relationship of sitting for so many years at the feet of such a great teacher. At the same time I was metaphorically clearing away my own internal muddiness through Thomas’s guidance.

Another time, Thomas and I went out to dinner at the Green Valley Grill and Thomas ordered wine for both of us. The waitress came to the table with a glass of merlot and basket of bread.

Thomas took the taste test and then passed the glass across the table to me. I tasted too. We looked at each other and both agreed, “Good wine.” The waitress left to get us a bottle.

Then Thomas broke a piece of bread and passed the basket to me. I took a piece of bread and ate. In that moment the impact of Eucharist became a staggering reality. We had been talking all day about the Universe Story and now here it was, 13.7 billion years of it gathered in this gesture, without dualism or separation. I experienced a momentary sense of spiritual vertigo and when I looked down, there were his black shoes steady on the floor under the table.

Although only a few seconds had passed in recalling these two memories, the shoes still held my attention. I blinked, then pulled up a chair to face Thomas.

“There is so much more I want to say to you.” Thomas said. “It is too bad you do not live closer so we could meet each week.”

“I will come back in a month,” I replied.

“Good,” he responded.

But we both knew that THIS was the moment of reckoning, the moment of grace. We faced into each other, our eyes locked, all boundaries blurred. It was clear we would be eternally fused in soul and spirit, that our years together had forged a unique intimacy between us and that death would be but a veil.

Thomas said, “Do you have what you need now?” I said, “Yes.”

“Good,” Thomas said. “Then get me my shoes over there in the corner, we need to be on our way.”

I walked over to the shoes, picked them up and helped Thomas get his feet into them. Once in his wheel chair, we made our way over to the Well-Spring dining room where we met Thomas’s sister Margaret for lunch.