

Thomas the Taproot

K. Lauren de Boer

K. Lauren de Boer is an essayist and poet who was Executive Editor of the spiritual ecology quarterly, *EarthLight* from 1995 to 2005. Currently on the faculty of The Institute for Educational Studies at Endicott College, Beverly, Massachusetts, his poetry, essays and interviews with leading visionaries and thinkers in the area of spiritual ecology and consciousness have been widely read and distributed. His new collection of poetry, "Where It Comes From," was published in 2008 and is available through his website.



For nearly ten years, I was privileged to shepherd *EarthLight*, a magazine of spirituality and ecology. *EarthLight* grew out of the Quaker community (specifically Pacific Yearly Meeting Committee on Unity with Nature) where a concern emerged that the spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis weren't being addressed, either within the faith community or the culture at large. The magazine's focus was kindred to a vision of Earth care that was growing at that time in the larger faith community and with spiritual persons who did not feel aligned with a particular faith.

I often liked to picture the magazine and its authors, artists, and readership as a tree. If the Quaker community was the trunk, and the branches and foliage were the readership and the larger network of spiritual centers with which *EarthLight* shared a common vision, Thomas Berry was more like the taproot. There were many other roots informing the magazine's vision (and my own), but the vision Thomas articulated came to carry the sap, a kind of lifeblood. That lifeblood is best expressed in Thomas's words as the creation of "mutually enhancing relations" between the human and the rest of the Earth community.

EarthLight was unerring in its devotion to this vision. There were many sources of inspiration for the magazine, but Thomas Berry provided the beginnings of a new lexicon as it were, a new way of articulating what felt latent within so many human souls, a language that represents a lost light shining, however dimly, in human consciousness. I saw that light grow in its intensity during my years at the magazine. A growing number of people began to realize it and express it, and it seemed that the discovery of Thomas's writings worked as a kind of watershed moment for their intuitive sense both of a deeper psycho-spiritual connection to the natural world and of an overarching alienation in the culture. Many people continue to build on the linguistic foundations he has laid.

This influence was true for me as well, in terms of my personal vision and relationship to the natural world. As I grew up in the American Midwest, I often experienced bewilderment at my friends, family, and acquaintances in what seemed to me to be a lack of care or sense of wonder at the natural world. My fascination was endless, whether it was the night whirring of cicadas, the limpid depth of a pool in my local creek, or a garden spider weaving her web on grape vines at dawn. I remember my first encounter with a yellow-crowned night heron on the banks of the creek. It was a windless afternoon, but as I relaxed into the place and moment, the foliage came alive around me. I experienced the heron's graceful glide and landing with ineffable joy, then watched her fish, forage, and groom herself in the shade of an embankment for what seemed like hours. Later, attempting to share my excitement with friends, I was met by blank stares all around. It's just a bird, Lauren.

How could everyone not share my enthusiasm and my passion? Even the (so-called) secular environmentalists of the time, while devoted to saving the natural world, seemed scared to death of anything couched in spiritual terms. For a time I took refuge in authors such as Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, and Barry Lopez. But it was Thomas who named the source of my bewilderment as a kind of autism in the Western world and helped me make sense of it. When I first discovered his writings—the *Riverdale Papers* and later *The Dream of the Earth*—I began to feel less crazy, less alone, and less marginalized. In that sense he has been a part of my own healing and an inspiration for my own work as a writer. And I think Thomas's writings have helped give the environmental community a way of talking about the Earth in a way that could transcend the technical, political, scientific, or dry policy language that could at times be so alienating and uninspiring to the general public.

My gratitude to Thomas runs deep. The depth of his scholarship and breadth of historical perspective have gone a long way toward affirming and authenticating my own intuitions, and those of many others, about what has gone awry in our relations with the Earth community. His spirit and wisdom provide the inspiration to do what needs to be done.