

GO TEAM!

By Catherine Browning

When I was a young girl growing up in the 1950s, I dreamed about becoming a nurse someday. I knew I wanted to help people. I eventually found my niche as a psychiatric nurse. I have devoted many decades of my life to practicing the art of nursing and continue to serve those in need to the best of my ability. I also had a deep passion for diverse cultures. Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California, I was exposed to so much diversity. There was also a lot of heterogeneity within my own family. My mother was Irish/Welsh Catholic and my stepfather Jewish. My father was Native American, and my stepmother was from Italy. They moved with my two brothers to Hawaii when I was 16 years old, so I spent a lot of my life on those amazing islands. I also studied at the American College of Switzerland in my first year of college. Located high up in the Swiss Alps, I fell in love with nature, mountains, French language, and learning. I was blessed to travel all over Europe. I even lived for three months on a Kibbutz in Israel/Palestine.

In 1981 I again traversed throughout Europe, spent more time in Israel/Palestine, and went to Egypt for my first time ever. To say the ancient Egyptian culture profoundly influenced me is an understatement. I was in absolute awe of their understanding of death and the afterlife. My last day in Egypt I vowed then and there with every ounce of my being, "I want to live in the Middle East someday."

Within days of returning from those overseas travels, I had a terrifying, mystical, deeply spiritual, near-death experience. I was twenty-eight years old and it seemed that I brought back with me some of the vibrating energy of ancient Egypt. I had a difficult-to-explain experience where I plummeted into a shattering dimension of facing the demonic and then encountering the divine. I died momentarily and my soul left my body. I headed straight for the heavenly realms where I heard the most beautiful sacred music imaginable. Looking forward to seeing my mother and family who had passed away by the time I was twenty-two years old, I was ecstatic as I ventured upward. I could see awesome golden gates off in the distance. I knew I would miss my brother John, my Aunt Margie, and my family in Hawaii, but I was ready to let go of everything else in my emotionally empty, Earthly world. It was just too difficult struggling

to live on my own. The heavenly existence was so alluring and absolutely captivating. My hopeful, refreshing afterlife was awaiting me and I was so excited to enter that domain.

As my soul rose closer and closer to the magnificence above, hundreds of beautiful angels floated down to greet me. It was amazing. Then the most glorious angel of them all presented herself before me. She had flowing blond hair with gentle curls and huge, expansive white wings on her angelic back. She looked me intensely in the eyes, then opened a splendid, pearl-and-gold book that she held tenderly in her hands. She looked at the pages and then at me. She telepathically told me with empathy, "It is not your time. You are not ready yet for heaven."

With not even a second to process this disappointing news, my soul was pulled back down into my body. It felt like some huge vacuum sucked me back into Earthly existence. Voom! I crash landed so hard back into my body. The event was painful and excruciating and I felt shattered beyond words. I also felt very confused. The aftermath of the mysterious event remained with me for years. It was challenging to get my feet back on the ground after such a profound brush with death. My health continued to seriously decline. My sense of peace and belonging was crushed. I was devastated. I cried daily missing God, dreaming of the angels, and longing for my mother and relatives on the other side. I felt so humbled and ashamed by the fact that I was not worthy or ready yet to enter heaven.

I searched everywhere within and without to find ways to better myself physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was utterly committed to changing everything about my life. I knew God must come first above all else. I looked everywhere for answers and methods of healing. I saw psychiatrists, shamans, holistic practitioners, and faith healers. I returned to my Catholic faith and also embraced other religions as well. I was fascinated with Judaism, Protestantism, Mormonism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American teachings, Indigenous beliefs, Hawaiian spiritual practices, and ancient Egyptian theologies. I wanted so badly to better myself so that I could hopefully someday enter God's sacred dwelling. I missed being with God and family in the heavenly realms so much. I cried and I cried as I lowered myself upon this earthy domain.

Then one day while living in a born-again Christian community in Oregon, the universe brought me a special message. It was a flyer promoting the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS).

Within weeks after seeing that in the local library, my hand literally fell upon Matthew Fox's book *Original Blessing*. I knew I was being called to attend Holy Names University in Oakland and study with Matthew. I knew God was going to show me how to live comfortably on this Earth and in my body once again. I knew there would be way-showers who could help me to make the best out of my time on this planet.

By the fall of 1987, I was fully immersed in my master's program at ICCS. We studied cross-cultural spiritualities, learned art as meditation, participated in sacred rituals from all religions, and examined the latest phenomena discovered in science and cosmology. I studied and worked with spiritual and theological trailblazer Matthew Fox. I spent three months immersed in the work of physicist Brian Swimme. I attended his weekly course presentations and the filming of the twelve-part series on cultural historian Thomas Berry's "Twelve Principles of the New Cosmology." I was enchanted when hearing some of the concepts presented: "Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects"; and, "The human is that being in whom the universe attains reflective consciousness of itself." I started to see the interconnectedness of the human species with other animal species and with all of creation. In a cosmological context, I began to ask about myself and about the human race, where have we come from, where are we now, and where are we headed in the future?

I started to appreciate the meaning of the Ecozoic era and the vital need to promote enhancement of human-Earth relations. I saw the urgency in protecting the environment and vibrant species. I became fully aware of Earth rotating around the sun, on a spiral arm of the Milky Way, floating through space with local clusters of galaxies, in the midst of millions of other galaxies, in the 13.8 billion-year-old known universe. Wow, holy moly what a wake-up call!

I no longer wanted to dwell upon the afterlife. I no longer only saw God as somewhere out there on the other side of existence. I suddenly realized that the divine is in our midst and I need not rush leaving planet Earth in order to be with the stunning Omnipotent One. God is right here, right now. God is omnipresent. There is nowhere where God is not.

Then sometime during that semester Thomas Berry came to speak to our class. He spoke about the harm to the environment caused by cars, cattle, and chainsaws. He also shared from his heart that his decision to be a Catholic priest gave him the opportunity to have quiet, intro-

spective time to ponder life's great mysteries. I spoke with him privately after his talk and told him how desperately I too needed daily reclusive, quiet time to ponder life's mysteries and feel complete oneness with God. I thanked him for helping me to stay more grounded and present to Earth's ongoing evolvement.

For the next twenty years, while also teaching and practicing psychiatric nursing, I dedicated myself to promoting creation-centered spirituality. I wrote articles and gave talks about the important interconnect-edness of science, spirituality, ritual, and art. For several years I worked as Matthew Fox's assistant and was his media spokesperson when he was silenced by the Vatican. I was contributing writer and managing editor of *Creation* magazine. I eventually moved to the Midwest and then to Kentucky where Mark Steiner and I co-founded Cultivating Connections. We participated in Creation Spirituality Connectors gatherings, offered spirituality groups in the home, and provided state and national workshops on spirituality, science, ritual, and art.

Mark and I attended a conference in North Carolina where Thomas Berry was presenting. We spoke with him about the work we were doing in promoting his ecozoic principles. He and his sister Margaret acknowledged the importance of our great work. When we parted at the end of the day, Thomas said enthusiastically to us with beaming smile and thumbs up, "Go Team!"

I cherish the memory of those words because I highly value teamwork in my personal relationships, my Earth relationships, my work setting, and visionary efforts. In the summer of 2001, Cultivating Connections co-sponsored with Jim and Eileen Schenk of Cincinnati's Imago, an amazing Earth Spirit Rising Conference. Held in Louisville, Kentucky, and supported by our wonderful local creation spirituality group, we featured prominent speakers such as Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme, and environmental attorney and minister Herman Greene.

The pioneering conference was attended by 1,000 people and brought together the best of spiritual and scientific creativity. At the conclusion of the enlightening event, we were acknowledged on stage with a copy of Thomas Berry's book *The Great Work*. It was presented in a lovely case by Deborah and Jack Cooney. Inside the beautiful case was an inspiring Thomas Berry quote: "We have identified the difficulties, but also the opportunities of what is before us."

Not long thereafter I received a book from Herman Greene, presi-

dent of the Center for Ecozoic Studies. Inside was a letter stating “without a vision, the people perish . . . we will see a new dawn.” Thomas Berry provides an amazing new-dawn vision for all of us. He points out the destructive side of human civilization which has become largely patriarchal. He pleads for an enhancing of societal wisdom by learning from Indigenous cultures, classical traditions, science, and women. How ironic, I thought, that one of the main reasons now-Episcopalian theologian, Matthew Fox, was silenced by the Vatican was partly because he was a “fervent feminist.” Hah, where would we all be without women? Certainly we wouldn’t be born yet. I can’t imagine not having astounding female role models like Mother Mary, my own mother Lois Catherine Daley, Mother Teresa, Marcia Stein and her awesome Jewish community, and amazing women like Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Rachel Carson, Corrie ten Boom, Anne Frank, Helen Keller, Jean Auel, and Elizabeth Peters. These women, along with my childhood heroine, Pollyanna, have inspired me so much! Women help us to feel more connected to Earth.

Just weeks after our wonderful Earth Spirit Rising Conference, I was offered a much-sought-for, amazing opportunity. I was hired by the country of Kuwait to teach psychiatric nursing and counsel war victims. Located in the heart of the desert, surrounded by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, Kuwait became my home for almost a decade. It was truly the ultimate fulfillment of my lifetime dream. Just before I left to go live there, Matt Fox said to me, “Catherine, not even Rumi was crazy enough to go to Kuwait.” I laughed about that for years. Living in the Near East was the most gratifying, edifying time. I was blessed to learn about Islam and honor holy practices with fellow Muslims. I read copious amounts of Persian poetry, especially works by the Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi. I arrived in Kuwait just a few days before September 11 and viewed the catastrophic events while living in the Arab world. I was surrounded by wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I traveled all over the Middle East and bowed in the holiest Muslim and Christian places.

I returned to re-settle in the United States in 2009. Crossing over from years of living in the Middle East to high tech 21st century Western culture was not that different from leaving the heavenly realms and suddenly crashing into the worldly realm. But the greetings by my brothers and their families, some close friends, the sensuousness of the seasons, the beauty of pristine snow, lovely trees and flowers in springtime, the sweetness of dogs and cats, diverse animal and human species in America

all welcomed me. They helped me to root and ground here once again. I am ever appreciative of the beauty of our land and the greatness of our country. God bless America.

Cultivating a sense of awe and wonder helps us to gaze upon Earth with adoring eyes and committed activism. Oh, the sun, moon, stars, rivers, oceans, fish, seashells, wildlife, birds, trees, flowers, deserts, camels, fields, and fresh air take my breath away. I feel revitalized with every inhalation and cherish walking upon sacred Earth. Having achieved this state of entrancement through the Great Work of Thomas Berry and his peers, I no longer daily wish to be in that other heavenly realm, at least not yet. I want to remain upon this Earth for as long as the Creator deems necessary to purify my soul and make me worthy for the blazing radiance yet to come. I strive to fulfill my human function (uh hum, as a woman I might add) who, as Brian Swimme would say, “makes room for the immensities and doesn’t get caught up and swallowed in all the trivialities and superficialities of life.”

I try to build peace between the Middle East and the West. I continue to visit the Middle East regularly and am still enchanted by Egypt! I work as a psychiatric nurse practitioner in a wonderful, rural healthcare clinic in the Midwest. My collaborating psychiatrist is Egyptian, and we have the best time working together. My boss is an amazing social worker and minister. All of our staff emulate the best of teamwork. I pray quietly each day, read, write, play the piano, and ponder mysteries. I know there are many challenges awaiting us in the future. But my near-death experience taught me that darkness enters in through fear, so we need to focus on forgiveness and love.

Let us each make loving choices, individually and collectively, so that our names will be forever imprinted in the Book of Life. Let us do all that we can to help one another. Let us continue our great, great work of truly celebrating and protecting our amazing Planet Earth. Make room for the immensities and always join together for the greatest enhancement of a new dawn.

Go Team!