

AWAKENING TO THOMAS AND LIVING HIS LEGACY

By Nancy Corson Carter

I met Thomas Berry at one of the “awakening moments” of my life. I went by myself from Florida, where I lived with my family in St. Petersburg and taught at Eckerd College, to the first North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology. That was in August 1987 at Epworth Forest Conference Center in northern Indiana. Something told me that this was a necessary journey, so there I was, a bit late but ready to learn. (I remember the lateness due to one detail at registration—all the towels had been handed out, but I gladly accepted a pile of washrags instead, and they did fine.)

I heard Wendell Berry speak. I met a Lummi shaman who told of his initiation among the Pacific killer whales, deep in their oceanic homes, and said he saw no contradiction in being both a native shaman and a Christian. But it was Thomas Berry whose gentle but commanding presence made the greatest impression upon me. His call of concern about the magnitude of our changing planet in a few decades of “culturally sponsored autism” among humans was riveting. How could I become part of the historical mission he envisioned? And that mission was (I took careful notes in my journal): “to re-invent the human—all our problems are species problems at the species level—reflectively, with critical awareness, within the community of life systems— in a time-developmental context. And story is always our basic source [that is, story and shared dreams].”

After his talk, I somehow had the courage to enter a conversation he was having with a group of people; and as I listened, I felt that he was someone I wanted to know. At one point that year, I sent him a copy of some of my writings which he received most generously, returning a fine sampling of his essays from his home, the Center for Religious Research, at 5801 Palisades, in Riverdale (the Bronx) just up the Hudson River from Manhattan.

I sent him a copy of my syllabus for a new course I called “Literature of Ecology: Writings of the Earth Household.” (He congratulated me on my reading list and urged that I include Loren Eiseley.) I soon added *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, a wonderful dialogue between “Youth” (Brian Swimme) and “Thomas” (Berry!). I still remember a wonderful line about coffee and fir trees in a passage in which Thomas expounds upon the necessity of learning to listen, *really*

listen—everywhere with every being. In forests, for example: “Forests are alive with music on all sorts of hidden levels, and when you hear this music you will know that the forest has permeated every cell of your body. *Sip a cup of coffee the next morning, and all the fir trees grow warm.* The natural, human, and divine worlds flow together into our feelings. You need no teacher. The universe is your teacher, the forests are your teachers.” (p. 95)

So I continue to hear Thomas’s voice now; it is a guide to wonder—“Our home is enchantment,” Swimme records him saying. Today, in 2019, Thomas’s is a voice of passion and child-like rapture coupled with wisdom that I do not want to forget; I know that this is deeply needed.

I have that book out on my desk, and I find it hard to stop reading. A chapter on land ends with Thomas’s great words about remembering: “What we eventually discover in our passionate remembering of the galactic, terrestrial, biological, and human stories is that a study of the universe is a study of self.” (p. 109) We are truly so much a part of it All!

Soon after *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* was published in 1999, I included it in yet another year’s version of my constantly evolving course at Eckerd.

We were lucky enough to have met with Thomas sometime soon thereafter because he inscribed the book in November 2001: “To Howard and Nancy as we journey together into the 21st century, Thomas Berry.”

I am grateful for this invitation to join in telling stories of the living legacy of Thomas Berry; this helps me to remember what an astounding legacy he has left us. I think of him as a great teacher and companion as I have kept teaching, writing, and serving in various capacities as a leader and participant in eco-justice advocacy, especially in Presbyterian Earth Care locally and nationally. In a time of enormous danger to Earth life, it is a gift to feel his always encouraging spirit with us. I close with the last words of *The Great Work* as a talisman both of urgency and of hope:

But even as we make our transition into this new century, we must note that moments of grace are transient moments. The transformation must take place within a brief period. Otherwise it is gone forever. In the immense story of the universe, that so many of these dangerous moments have been navigated successfully is some indication that the universe is for us rather than against us. We need only summon these forces to our support in order to succeed. Though the human challenge to these purposes must never be underestimated, it is difficult to

believe that the larger purposes of the universe or of the planet Earth will ultimately be thwarted.