

## ELDER BERRY AND US

By Betty Lou Chaika

I vividly remember my first encounter with Thomas Berry. In the spring of 1990 I was struggling to hold together my three passions—for being in nature, for spiritual fellowship, and for creative work. In reading *The Dream of the Earth* I had been deeply moved by Thomas's ability to lyrically weave together the material and spiritual dimensions of life with a celebration of human creativity. Moving from the urban San Francisco Bay Area to rural North Carolina, I had been experiencing many encounters with animals in both the outer wild and the inner wild of dreams, and fervently holding the question of what it means when myths and fairy tales and Indigenous people all over the world say that animals speak to us. *What does it mean that wild animals speak to us?*

At the time, our son was in middle school. He told us he was writing a book called "The Quest." One night he asked me to send him on a quest. I wrote out this quest for him to take to an Earth Day school campout:

*In polluting the land, air, and waters and in clearing land for development of housing, shopping centers, and roads we are destroying the habitats of many species. Without their homes they can't live. We have lost our ancient deep connection with animals. We regard them only as pets or as food, or as entertaining attractions. That's why we allow this.*

*Yet the stories of peoples from all over the world and from all different times tell of communication with wild animals, of animals and people speaking to each other, helping each other in times of need, even of animals being able to transform into people and people into animals. What have we forgotten?*

*A quest is to find something, an object or an answer to a question. Your mission, Tristan, should you choose to accept it, is to find out about the native animals who live in your habitat, these Piedmont woods, fields, and streams. And to answer the question: What is communication with animals, and how does it happen?*

At the same time there was to be an ecumenical conference on Land Stewardship at Brown's Summit, where Thomas Berry would speak. I was excited at the opportunity to experience the coming together of spiritual communities *in relation to nature*. Communities of nature and of

spirit were both important to me, but they were rarely joined together. I had arrived at the conference and was enjoying a walk in the lush forest amidst wonderful mosses, lichen-covered rocks, and wildflowers when suddenly I came upon a very large, lumpy, black rat snake lying right across the path, stopping me in my tracks. A rat snake when confronted kinks itself and becomes motionless. We looked at each other for a long time. I took this as a synchronous appearance. Snakes sense the world around them through picking up vibrations with their entire bodies and tasting the smells in the air by flicking their tongues. This alerted me to tune into my senses and trust my feelings in what was about to unfold.

The presentations were all about stewardship and the ethics and responsibilities of land *use*. I kept thinking about what I had overheard a young man say in the morning, that we needed to gain a spiritual relationship with the land, hear the land speaking to us. Yes, I didn't want to hear about stewardship. I wanted to learn about *voice*. I wanted to ask the American Indian man sitting nearby what he knew about hearing nature's voices and to say that this stewardship talk bothered me because it seemed patriarchal. Just then Thomas Berry stood up and said, "It's not enough to talk about stewardship. We must listen to the voices of the trees, the voices of the animals, the voices of the land." It was as if he had heard my thoughts and spoken to me! Ah, here were words that I wanted to listen to!

I went up to him afterwards (wearing my mountain lion earrings for courage) and told him that I had had experiences of plants and trees as a child that I recognized as communication, but not experiences of communication with animals. At first he started to talk about having a dog, but I stared him in the eye, and, looking deeply back into my eyes, he said, "You get the communication, you just don't recognize it. It's not in the form you expected." As he spoke, I remembered that I had been having these synchronous experiences and dreams of animals. Maybe these *were* forms of communication—I just wasn't recognizing them as such. Thus began a life-long exploration of synchronicity and kinship with wild animals and with this man whom I felt to be a mentor in such matters. (At the recent 2019 conference on the living legacy of Thomas Berry held in the Piedmont region of North Carolina [TB19], many people shared similar experiences of being spoken to very personally by Thomas on a level that deeply supported their unique interests.)

Thereafter I heard Thomas Berry speak many times—at Duke, at

Carolina, at our local Jung Society, at Earth Spirit Rising, and at many other conferences and gatherings over the years. He continues to speak to me. In preparing to attend the TB19 conference I read an old paper of his, *Elders: Their Creative Role in the Human Community*, in which he called upon us to take up the role of elders and tell our personal stories of “bio-cultural regionalism” with “a high level of emotional-aesthetic-spiritual communion with the natural world.” These two phrases leaped out at me, his voice loudly supporting what I feel called to convey in my own work of eldering.

As an elder my overarching desire is to hold together the communi-



*Betty Lou Chaika—  
Calling the Ancestors*

ty of people with the community of plants, animals, and spirits native to our place on Earth in a joyous circle of love and belonging, as we were always meant to be joined. As an artist, writer, and photographer, I teach eco-psycho-spirituality through weaving illustrated stories on the Earth Sanctuaries website and through forming an Earth Sanctuaries community.

The Earth Sanctuaries website ([www.earthsanctuaries.net](http://www.earthsanctuaries.net)) comprises four sections:

*Pilgrimage Stories* includes tales of pilgrimages to sacred landscapes at home and abroad, whether to our Native American relatives on a reservation in Wisconsin, or to the stone circles, holy wells, and sacred landscapes of Ireland and the British Isles, where we make ceremonies of connection to our ancestors and to the spirits of the land. In all these sacred places we learn from

the land herself as the Body of the Mother. Deeply immersed in ancestral healing, I believe that prayers for contact between our deep-time Indigenous European ancestors (who were themselves colonized) and Native American ancestors will bring the wisdom and healing we need in these dire times. I feel Thomas's support for this work of deepening relationships with contemporary and ancestral Indigenous elders.

*Garden Sanctuaries* is dedicated to making creative spaces for communing with nature, and welcoming people and critters to Temenos Garden Sanctuary. We have restored the bottomland forest of our semi-rural acre with over 300 species of native plants. With a fantastic array of species of fauna, it has been certified as a Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation, a Conservation Garden by the North Carolina Native Plant Society, and as Bird Friendly Habitat by Audubon. There is a Moss Garden Sanctuary, a Medicine Wheel/Herb Garden, a Forest Wildflowers Path, a Pollinator Garden, and Water Garden ponds that attract amphibians. I can see Thomas strolling through and blessing the creatures of this garden sanctuary.

*Natural Communities* honors the plants and animals of the diverse and beautiful habitats of the North Carolina coastal plain, Piedmont, and mountain bioregions through drawings, photographs, and writings. In them I try to hold together matter and spirit, a naturalist's view of native plants and animals, with a mystic's view of the sacredness of our landscapes. Native habitats are Earth sanctuaries for the unique communities of plants and animals that live together in them. As a holder of certificates in both Botanical Illustration and Native Plant Studies from the North Carolina Botanical Garden, I hope these words and images that describe the sacred natural communities where I live will inspire others to savor and protect the wild lands where they live. I hear the mystic in Thomas conveying the sacredness of our kinship with our relatives in the wild.

*Seasonal Celebrations* includes reflections on creating both small, intimate seasonal rituals and large community-created, multi-media, Earth-based ceremonies that honor our relationship to nature and spirit throughout the turning of the wheel of the year. In these events we raise awareness of the soul of the seasons as they manifest both within us and all around us. We witness Thomas telling us that the fundamental nature of the universe is celebration.

### **An Earth Sanctuaries Community**

Sharing reverence with the original Indigenous ancestors of this land, I long to live in a spiritual community within an intact native landscape and with wild animals around us every day. Rather than being just a strange personal desire, this was, and still is, I believe, a very normal human need. I can't help but wonder whether all the addictive craving for social media is a frantic attempt to replace all the other missing sources of intimacy with nature and spirit, because the extreme loneliness would be intolerable. I need to be part of a community that ritually celebrates our kinship with plants and animals and our identity as people of the sacred land. I realize that my need for eco-spiritual community is also an ancestral need, going back thousands of years. I feel the pain of generations of separateness of my Northern European ancestors from the wild spirit, from the animals, from the ensouled land, that was taken from them when they were themselves colonized. I long for healing for myself and for them. I long for whole networks of local communities of tenders of spirited Earth, carrying on the work of our ancestors.

We are in the process of forming such an eco-psycho-spiritual-creative community in which to practice becoming more indigenous, more "of a place," in this local place where we live. Through storytelling we are weaving a new story of our belonging. When we feel a deep sense of belonging, not only to a community of people, but also to our community of non-human relatives on the land, we will take care of Earth out of a sense of love, blessing each of these beings because they are part of us. We are calling for people to join together as a local community of elders practicing response-ability to the ensouled natural world through dialogue, prayer, ritual, ceremony, and creative play; to join together as a community of healers engaged in healing the wounds to ourselves and to nature engendered by Western culture's persistent splitting of Nature,

Self, and Spirit; to join together as a spiritual community based in nature and celebrated with song, music and dance; to join together as co-creators of intimate Earth-Spirit rituals, public seasonal celebrations, and healing ceremonies.

As a retired Jungian and spiritually-oriented psychotherapist, I am interested in fostering both creative process and healing processes within an Earth-based community. Authentic movement, drawing, singing, chanting, drumming, and making ritual offerings are some of the ways we awaken the energies of the Inner Wild (Body, Soul, Self). Listening to, speaking to, communing with the beings of Nature and Spirit, we awaken awareness of the energies of the Outer Wild. We are guided by the intuitions and synchronicities that arise in the field of entwined energies where Inner and Outer Wildness meet, dance, and play together. We share and enact the big Earth-Spirit dreams that arise from the world psyche. We invite the mythopoetic medicines that arise from tapping into the Source, the creative wellspring, in answer to our contemporary needs for healing. We seek to contact the wisdom of the deep psyche where we *are* one with the wild, where we are one with Earth.

Yes, in *The Great Work* Thomas says, “This we need to know, how to participate creatively in the wildness of the world about us. For it is out of the wild depths of the universe and of our own being that the greater visions must come.”

At the close of the TB19 conference, feeling an urgency to bring into our beautiful human gathering an awareness of the animated community of plants and animals that had been busily going about their lives around us, I wrote and shared this poem:

### **On the Tenth Anniversary of Thomas Berry’s Passing**

A swallow sculpts a green smile  
of a nest on a beam of the barn above  
all our comings and goings.  
Cricket frogs shake their marble-  
filled rattles louder  
than our sweet words of praise.  
Tiger swallowtails puddle on the  
muddy edge of the lake between  
willows and the tag alder, in which

a red-rumped assassin bug lurks,  
slurping sustenance, as do we.  
Swift swallows swoop over  
the water nabbing bugs for those  
yellow-mouthed babies lined up  
at the edge of new life.  
Elder flowers, white dinner plate doilies,  
hover on the edge of becoming  
black-red juiciness.  
May we become elders and flowers  
and medicine as our Elder  
Berry has been for us.

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