

Thomas Berry and Martin Luther King, Jr.: Cosmology, Ecology, and Social Justice

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Twenty-four years ago I heard Thomas Berry speak for the first time. The setting was the Earth and Spirit Conference in Seattle in October 1990. On the opening night of the conference, after stirring talks by Brian Swimme and Joanna Macy, Thomas gave a speech that lit the room on fire. He invoked the depths of environmental destruction and the mass extinction crisis by saying, “We have to be terrorized by what we’ve done, but not without hope.”

He suggested that we put the Bible on the shelf for twenty years until we learn to read the scripture of the natural world. He said we should put *Webster’s Dictionary* on the shelf as well because we needed a new language to guide us into an ecological future. He said the dark side of the Western tradition was its treatment of the natural world as objects to be used and exploited. He said we needed a new religious consciousness that saw the Earth as primary. And, of course, he spoke his sublime mantra and ethical formula: “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

Even before this conference I was favorably inclined to Thomas from reading his essays in *The Dream of the Earth*,¹ from hearing descriptions of his work from Miriam Therese MacGillis, O.P., on her “Fate of the Earth” audiotape,² and from other sources. What I thought was confirmed when I heard Thomas speak: I was in the presence of a prophet.

What I experienced when I heard Thomas speak twenty-four years ago was like what Brian Swimme described in an email he sent to our graduate school community a couple years ago. Brian said, “Hi everyone. First my life story. In 1978 Thomas Berry wrote an

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1. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
 2. Miriam Therese MacGillis, O.P., “Fate of the Earth,” audiotape, 1986, accessed May 4, 2017, <http://thegreatstory.org/macgillis.html>.

article 'The New Story.' When I read it in 1979, I knew in a vague way that this is going to occupy a lot of my life."

So this was the confirmation. I had already felt, in a vague way, that *this* might occupy a lot of my life. When I heard him speak that night, I was convinced.

I left the Earth and Spirit Conference with my friend Steve Snider, who had come up to Seattle from Prescott College with me. We were more determined than ever to carry forward this plan that we had to create a college-level course on Thomas Berry's work. And in spring 1991 we did offer a course at Prescott College called "The New Cosmology," which we later changed to "New Cosmology: The Universe Story." We taught this course for three semesters. We were students, but because Prescott College was an experiential school, we were able to create a group independent study and do this. I think that was one of the early college-level courses in the United States on ecology, worldview, and the vision of Thomas Berry.

As we taught and revised the course, we learned more about Thomas Berry's work, and I was able to study with Thomas in the summers of 1991, '92, and '93 in Assisi, Italy. So even as I was still learning and trying to get my mind around this, it seemed so important, so inspirational, so vitalizing that I felt a responsibility to begin sharing it and I haven't stopped. A lot of my journey for the last twenty-five years has been promoting ecology, social justice, and cosmology through education and the arts.

I've told you a little bit about our early educational ventures. In addition, my friend Steve and another friend, Omar Zinn—all of us were from Chapel Hill, North Carolina—started the rap group, "Sweet Acidophilus." Part of our inspiration was what Thomas and Brian were always saying even after they published their book, *The Universe Story*,³ which was that the universe story is not a book, the universe around us is communicating its own story in every raindrop, every photon of light and every shimmering aspen leaf. Thomas would say that each of us needs to tell the universe story. We need especially for artists to tell the universe story and we need

3. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Beginning of the Eozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding Cosmos* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

the artist within each of us to tell the universe story.

So when we started this rap band, Sweet Acidophilus, the third song we wrote was called “The Universe Jam.”

The first verse
of the universe,
pours forth
like a sea of mystery
out of the void.

Unmanifest
silence,
space-time,
comes into existence.

Unseen shaping,
swirling,
unfurling,
hydrogen, helium,
divine is revealed
within galactic whirlpools
as energy flows in.

A star collapses,
supernova explosion,
a cloud of cosmic debris,
drawn together by gravity,
by the mystery of attraction,
primordial bonding,
universe action.

It goes on like that. So that was “The Universe Jam.”

Let me talk briefly now about what I consider to be some of the key insights of Thomas Berry.

I certainly can't go into all of the important aspects of Thomas's work, but I want to identify a few that I think are particularly important.

The first key insight of Thomas Berry is that human beings *are* the universe (and the Earth within the universe) thinking about itself. For example, Thomas wrote: “The human is precisely that being

in whom this total process reflects on and celebrates itself, and its numinous origins, in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.”⁴

Thomas, like Taoism, is very simple and very profound at the same time. There's a lot of depth to what he is saying and yet it can sound almost too simple at first. We humans are the universe. We are the Earth thinking about itself. The deeper concept is that every phenomenon on Earth is the Earth. The Earth flies when the birds take wing. The Earth gained sight when the first eyeball evolved. The Earth writes poetry when we write poetry. The Earth composes symphonies through Mozart, and creates brilliance through John Coltrane.

Thomas is talking about the total unity of the process and a redefinition of what the human being is. It's a 180-degree turn in Western thinking.

The second key insight of Thomas Berry is that the universe is a spiritual process from its beginning as well as a physical process. He gets this directly from Teilhard de Chardin. There is a great line in *The Great Work* where he says, “The human is neither an addendum to the universe, nor an intrusion into the universe. We are quint-essentially integral with the universe. In ourselves the universe is revealed to itself as we are revealed in the universe.”⁵

It's fantastic, it's thrilling. I do think that he gets some of this sensibility from Alan Watts. There are several statements of Watts I've seen recently that are very, very similar to this type of language. Watts said, “You are an aperture through which the universe is looking at and exploring itself.”⁶

Thomas wrote in *The Dream of the Earth*: “The thoughts and emotions, the social forms and rituals of the human community are as much ‘earth’ as the soil and the rocks and the trees and the

4. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the 21st Century*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2009), 126.

5. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 32.

6. Brianna Wiest, “26 Of The Most Mind-Opening Alan Watts Quotes,” accessed May 4, 2017, <http://soulanatomy.org/26-of-the-most-mind-opening-alan-watts-quotes/>.

flowers.”⁷ Watts wrote: “If you see yourself in the correct way, you are all as much extraordinary phenomenon of nature as trees, clouds, the patterns in running water, the flickering of fire, the arrangement of the stars, and the form of a galaxy.”⁸ “You and I are all as much continuous with the physical universe as a wave is continuous with the ocean. The ocean waves, and the universe peoples.”⁹

You get what I’m saying: It’s the unity of the human and the Earth process that is so important and it’s a psychic-spiritual process from the beginning.

The third key insight of Thomas Berry, one that really got me excited when I was starting at Prescott College, is that all educational areas and disciplines can be integrated by the comprehensive context of the Earth and universe. I was galvanized into action when I read the chapter in *The Dream of the Earth* on “The American College in the Ecological Age.”¹⁰ At the time, I was just beginning my studies at Prescott College, a small liberal arts college of just the sort that Thomas said was really important as we move forward.

As I said before, Steve Snider and I created and taught this course “New Cosmology: The Universe Story,” but we had a greater goal: we were like...we need to reinvent Prescott College education! We were handing out copies of Thomas’s chapter on “The American College in the Ecological Age.” Remember in yesterday’s session I mentioned being zealous. Well, Steve Snider and I waited outside the Board of Directors meeting of Prescott College with mimeographed copies of that chapter and as each Board member came out we handed them a copy.

I think it’s fascinating what Thomas talks about in that essay: To tell the universe story comprehensively you would have to bring every member of the faculty together. You would have to have the physicist and the artist and the anthropologist and the mathematician. So it’s just a brilliant image of the unity of the educational process within a cosmological context. You couldn’t do an introductory

7. Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 91-92.

8. Ibid.

9. Alan Watts: Quotes, accessed May 4, 2017, <http://openmindspace.org/AlanWatts>.

10. Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 89-108.

course for students on the universe story without bringing all of the faculty together in some sense.

And then there is this great passage from *Befriending the Earth* where Thomas says,

What is education? Education is knowing the story of the universe, how it began, how it came to be as it is, and the human role in the story. There is nothing else. We need to know the story, the universe story in all its resonances, in all of its meanings. The universe story is the divine story, the human story, the story of the trees, the story of the rivers, of the stars, the planets, everything. It is as simple as a kindergarten tale, yet as complex as all cosmology and all knowledge and all history.... It gives a new context for education.¹¹

Let me quickly move on to my fourth key insight of Thomas Berry, which is the power of story. I think it's a critical insight of Thomas's—the importance of narratives. He is the first person I heard talking about this. I'd be interested to hear from you all where you think Thomas gets this...we heard a little bit about Mircea Eliade¹² yesterday and we also talked about Giambattista Vico.¹³

Thomas said, "Narrative is our primary mode of understanding. This is how we understand anything. This is why we tell stories to our children." When Thomas was emphasizing story, there wasn't a whole lot in the culture about this. In 1988, the same year as the publication of *The Dream of the Earth*, the six-part series of Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell on "The Power of Myth,"¹⁴ came

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11. Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and Earth*, eds. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 101.
 12. Mircea Eliade, 1907-1986, was a famous historian of religion who taught at the University of Chicago.
 13. Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744, was an Italian political philosopher and rhetorician, historian and jurist. Thomas Berry wrote his doctoral dissertation on Vico.
 14. Bill Moyers interviewed Joseph Campbell and his interviews were presented in six episodes in 1988. The episodes are available and may be viewed at, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://billmoyers.com/series/joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-1988/>.

out. It was one of the most popular series ever on public television. Interest in the power of stories has continued to grow. I'm on Twitter and there are dozens and dozens of different accounts on storytelling and story, and there is storycorps.org and bighistoryproject.com and more. I think that he was once again ahead of the curve in terms of recognizing the importance of narrative, the importance of story. Of course this all ties in to the overarching significance of Thomas's approach to cosmology and worldview.

Let me move along quickly to the core of what I want to share in terms of connecting cosmology with social justice. We talked yesterday about conversation partners. So let me tell you a little of how I got into this. I had dinner with Carl Anthony. Do you know Carl Anthony—African-American eco-psychologist, architect, and urban planner, co-founder of the journal *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, past President of the Earth Island Institute, Founder and Executive Director of Urban Habitat? He was and is a very significant and accomplished figure.

Here's something from my journal in October 2000: "On Saturday night Israel my son and Jeanine Canty (she teaches in Boulder) and I ate dinner with Carl Anthony and Belvie Rooks. Carl expressed his profound disappointment with Thomas's book, *The Great Work*. He asked how he could articulate an overarching 'great work' for all humanity and make no mention of justice, racism, oppression, and the 500-year resistance struggle against Western domination. He also stressed that Thomas is his Bible and that what's there in *The Great Work* is amazing, but this is a profound omission in the vision that was otherwise so comprehensive." That was my commentary on the dinner.

And then I wrote, "This conversation has gifted me with the core of my dissertation: to unite the cosmology of Berry with the movement for justice." I had already been reading Martin Luther King, Jr. I had already been kind of interested in this and had already noticed a few things in this direction. But this really was powerful to hear Carl Anthony say Thomas Berry is my Bible and yet I'm profoundly disappointed in this book called *The Great Work*.

Not everybody has to deal with everything. One of my pet peeves is when somebody does 99 things great and then someone says, "Oh,

but you forgot that one.” So I’m not saying Thomas has to do everything, but here is where the problem comes in: When you have a vision that is so comprehensive, and you’re putting forth a prescription that’s so comprehensive, and you are going to call it *the* “Great Work,” for our civilization, on the planet, at this time—then it’s a profound omission when you don’t have any mention of 500 years of oppression of African and African-American peoples. There are other social justice issues we could talk about for sure, but this is the one that Carl Anthony brought up.

I sat with that for a while...months and months. I was looking at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s work, but I had not given him that much attention, because I am kind of contrarian. When somebody is celebrated that much I am—well, you know...whatever.

But it got to a point where I said I’ve got to find out more about Gandhi and I’ve got to find out about King myself. And when you read their materials, you go, “Okay, I get it. I see why they are so celebrated. There is a lot here and it’s pretty amazing and powerful.”

With King and especially in the United States, we have a very foreshortened, superficial kind of “Hallmark card” presentation and understanding. Jesse Jackson says we treat Dr. King like he’s a big civil rights Teddy bear and we forget that this guy was radical.

I found that to be really true when you go back and read his speeches, sermons, and writings. He says things like this...I believe this is from a speech about ten days before his assassination: “A nation that will hold people in slavery for 244 years will ‘thingify’ them, will treat them as things.” This idea is not original with King—he drew on Tillich and Buber and Aime Cesaire—but I had never heard the term “thingify.”

Immediately a light went off in my head, and I remembered a conversation when I was sitting with Thomas in his hermitage in Greensboro, just the two of us, and he said, “People say that you shouldn’t treat a person as a thing, and that’s a good saying...But you shouldn’t even treat a thing as a thing...because there is no such thing as a thing!”

Notice that here we have Thomas Berry, ecological thinker, cosmological thinker, all the way over here; and we have Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights thinker, social justice thinker, all the way over

here; and they are both talking about the same principle.

I became interested in this. This was many years ago, before people were talking as much about the intersection between ecology and social justice. And I'm saying to myself, if I'm seeing this, then I have a responsibility to work with it and see if I can develop and share it. I began to ask myself, what are the deep principles that connect ecology, cosmology, and social justice?

It seems to me that personhood connects these—cosmic personhood, not only human personhood. Think of the way the Native Americans talk about the “bird people” and the “tree people.” If we have that kind of definition of personhood, then this is what Thomas is talking about when he says the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. It's the same thing King is talking about with “thingifying” people and keeping them in slavery for 244 years. Thomas is talking about thingifying the natural world, thingifying the cosmos.

So personhood, or reverence, connects this. I also began to feel that another deep principle that connects these is community.

As I began delving into King's speeches, sermons, and writings, I began to notice more of these resonances of cosmology, ecology, and social justice. King says frequently, “The universe is on the side of justice,” and he also says frequently, “We have cosmic companionship in the struggle for justice.” These are just two short, pithy statements. I wasn't really clear what he meant by them. I thought they could have just been rhetorical flourishes, or they could be revelatory of the essence of his worldview. I wasn't sure. I had to do more research.

So as I delved into more of his work, I began to see more and more of these references to the cosmos and the universe. I began to see more and more references in Martin Luther King, Jr., to what we would now clearly call ecological thinking or systems thinking. I found so much, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on it, which is finally done!

Let me give you a few examples to be more specific about what I was seeing. This was fascinating: In 1956, in the middle of the bus boycott he gives the sermon called “Our God Is Able.” But the title doesn't tell you what he is going to go into. He goes into the cosmic.

He talks about the solar system. He talks about how fast Earth is traveling through space. He talks about how the sun, although it appears near to us, is 93 million miles away. He's basically bringing his audience, in the middle of the Montgomery bus boycott, into the cosmological wonder of how we are situated in our solar system.

King had a very cosmological sense of justice—justice is woven into the cosmos. So when he meets with white leaders during the Montgomery bus boycott, he says, we need to decide if we are going to give our allegiance to outdated customs or to the ethical demands of the universe.

Some of this, you could say, was because he was being strategic; that he used cosmological language to be more inclusive than using theological language.

But I think that his cosmological references were very sincere with him. There is no question in terms of my research. There is some great stuff online at the King Center's digital archives. I found an undated index card--perhaps notes from a book, or perhaps written by him--but in his own handwriting, which conveys a sense of cosmological wonderment. It states (some of these figures are outdated):

I stood one night on the ship on the blue Mediterranean. The heavens are vast. Mercury 36 million miles away traveling 36 million miles a second, always day. Venus 67 million miles away. Jupiter 88 million miles away, 16 times larger than Earth. Neptune with the climate as such men could live 10,000 years before age could attack them. Saturn 86 million miles away. The moon, satellite of the [Earth], no air and water there, always 200 below zero. Thirty-six million stars—the nearest star 1,000,900,000 miles away; stars that guide sailors in storms; stars that enrapture astrologers as they ponder the zodiac; stars of the Milky Way; stars that thrill the hearts of poets.

So King had a deeply cosmological interest and sense. He also had what I would call a deeply *ecological* worldview; and I think, based on the research I've uncovered, that King should be recognized in the lineage of early ecological thinkers and he should be recognized in the lineage of early systems thinkers.

Let me explain what I mean by this. The last book King wrote that was published in his lifetime was called *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*¹⁵ And then soon after he was assassinated, a posthumous book called *The Trumpet of Conscience*¹⁶ was published. It's a collection of the five Massey Lectures he gave through the Canadian Broadcasting System in November and December 1967. I'm so thankful he was asked to give these lectures. Just 2-3 months before he was assassinated he had his opportunity to give these five talks and to really pour out everything that was on his mind in the last months of his life.

I consider these to be the clearest expression of his final worldview. The first four are in the radio studio. King is at his worst when reading from a script. It is painful almost to listen to him reading the first four of the Massey Lectures. But the fifth one was delivered live from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, on December 24, 1967. It's called "A Christmas Sermon on Peace."¹⁷ He says things like, "If we are to have peace on Earth we must develop a world perspective.... It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated."

Now I want to put a challenge out to you. If I told you that John Muir said, "It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated," or that Rachel Carson or James Lovelock said this, you wouldn't have a problem believing it would you? Were you surprised to hear this from Martin Luther King, Jr.?

King had used this idea of interrelatedness earlier in a work you will recognize, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." He wrote, "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.... We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

But in his Christmas Sermon on Peace of December 24, 1967—I

15. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967).

16. *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968).

17. Text available at, accessed May 9, 2017, http://www.ecoflourish.com/Primers/education/Christmas_Sermon.html; video available at, accessed May 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljeyIAH3bUI>.

want you to get this distinction—he takes this statement further and this is why I think it is an essential part of his worldview:

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality. Did you ever stop to think that you can't leave for your job in the morning without being dependent on most of the world?... This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.¹⁸

I would submit to you that anytime you are talking about the interrelated structure of all reality, you're talking ecologically, you're talking cosmologically, you're talking in terms of systems thinking.

So this has been one of my efforts, to connect ecology, cosmology, and social justice using Martin Luther King Jr. as a paradigmatic figure of what I call a “cosmology of connection.”

The last thought I'll leave you with is, if cosmology means worldview, the problem is not that we just need a worldview, it is that we have a worldview. It is not that we just need a cosmology, no, we have a cosmology. What we need is a cosmology of connection—this is what Martin Luther King, Jr. presents us with and offers to us is a cosmology of connection. And what Thomas Berry offers us is a cosmology of connection. The reason why Thomas celebrates Eastern wisdom and indigenous wisdom is because they have cosmologies of connection. The reason why he criticizes the Western worldview is because we have a cosmology of separation, a cosmology of disconnection. We have what Thomas terms a “radical discontinuity” between the human and the natural world, one that we perceive and perpetuate. This is the anthropocentrism, the human-centeredness, that, as Thomas says, gives all the rights and all the value to the human, and no rights and no value to the more-than-human realm.

So I think Thomas Berry, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eastern

18. *Ibid.*

wisdom, Indigenous wisdom, goddess spirituality, ecofeminism--all are social justice work. All of these are ways of reinvigorating and creating a cosmology of connection.

I think there are deep, deep, practical connections between Thomas's cosmology and work for social justice. Thomas's statement that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection objects" is not just an ecological-cosmological statement, it is a social justice statement. When Thomas says "It's all a question of story," this is not just an ecological-cosmological statement, it is also a social justice statement. We can look at racism, sexism, and heterosexism as dysfunctional stories.

Now I will take some questions, and then I'll end with a poem.

Questions and Answers

Comment: Drew, the first time I encountered a great connection between ecology and social justice was in the "Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream" symposium of the Pachamama Alliance. I want to thank you for your part in putting together that program because it changed my life.

Response: What a great opportunity I was given. Some of you may not know the story. The Pachamama Alliance is a nonprofit group in San Francisco. They called in 2003 and said to me, we were told that you knew Thomas Berry and had studied with Thomas Berry. I said, yes, and then they said they wanted me to come over and meet with them. They quickly added that they had been doing work with the Achuar people in Ecuador and Peru. The Achuar people had thanked them for coming to Ecuador to help them protect the rain forest and their culture, *and* if you really want to help us protect this in the long run you, you need to go back and change the dream of the North. You need to change the dream of the modern world. That was the charge they had been given by the Achuar people of the Amazon and then they came across a quote from Thomas Berry in the back of a Jerry Mander book about the mythic entrancement of the industrial world. They called me up and asked, "Do you think there is any connection between what the Achuar told us and

Thomas Berry?" And I told them "Hell yeah!"

I worked with them as a consultant. I was part of a small core team and helped them develop the original "Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream" symposium. I gave them my cosmological slideshow that I had developed in the '90s that became part of the film they made. That symposium was a great way to bring Thomas's work into a program that has been given in 78 countries and has been translated into 18 languages.

Comment: When you were talking about Thomas Berry and how he left out the social justice piece, I think it was implicit in his materials even if he did not directly speak to it. What do you think?

Response: I think that's right. I don't believe for a second that Thomas Berry didn't care about social justice. One of things that my professor Robert McDermott said is that in the history of philosophy, you have to understand the writers are responding to what came before them. If you take something out of context, you don't understand that it was written as a response to issues of that time. So Thomas would often say social justice cannot be achieved in the industrial context. You can't help people directly anymore, you have to change the industrial context in which we are living.

That's a profoundly unsatisfactory answer to people who are dealing with oppression on a daily basis, but I think Thomas was so adamant because he was responding to decades and decades and decades and decades of people not thinking of social justice as being anything other than human-centered social work. Thomas was saying we may never completely eradicate social injustice and we can get caught in a whirlpool for decades more and miss the larger issue of ecological injustice and its effects. It's not that he didn't care about social justice, but the particular gift he was offering is the focus on the transition to the Ecozoic era. I think he cared very much about social justice within that context, but he didn't deal specifically with it.

Comment by Heather Eaton: I think for him social justice comes out of a dream and a vision and an orientation. For him justice isn't

a vision, it's a practice that comes from a vision. He was extremely interested in justice, but for him it came from a worldview and vision.

Comment by Herman Greene: I would point to Thomas's three mediations: divine-human, human-human, and human-Earth. He was trying to balance these.

Response: Yes, and he felt like so much had been written on the first two that his particular message was the third.

Comment: I would like to bring up *Community: The Structure of Belonging* by Peter Block. We cannot address social justice issues and environmental issues as separate silos. Block talks about how separation is embedded in our language and how we can change that. It's very powerful.

Comment by Jim Schenk: I am a social worker. My feeling is that Thomas talks about social justice when he talks about the Earth. We are Earth. So everything he says about Earth, we can translate into ourselves. In this way he very much deals with social justice. I think our big struggle is seeing ourselves as part of Earth.

Ok, I will close with a poem. This is a poem I wrote for Thomas Berry:

Carolina Prophet: Poem for Thomas Berry

we were dreamed
in the cores
of the stars.
like the stars,
we were meant to unfold

we were dreamed in the depths
of the undulating ocean.
like the waves,
we were meant to unfold

like bursting supernovas, birthing elements,
which crucibles give rise to creativity?

the world makes us
its instrument.

Father Thomas,
speaking for stars, in a voice
old as wind: 'origin moments
are supremely important'

what are the origins
of a prophet?

found in syllables of Sanskrit,
or Chinese characters?
in a decade of midnight prayer?

in childhood epiphanies
rising like heat?
blue Carolina sky;
dark pines;
crickets;
birds;
sunlight
on the lilies,
in the meadow,
across the creek.

born in Carolina
on the eve of the Great War,
Saturn conjoining Pluto in the sky.
raised in a world of wires and wheels,
watching dirt roads turn to pavement.

brooding intensity,
measuring loss
when others could see only progress.
white hair communing with angels of Earth

Father Thomas, reminding us
we are constantly bathed in shimmering memories
of originating radiance

we are constantly bathed in shimmering memories
of originating radiance

the psychic stars:
the conscious soil:

this thin film of atmosphere;

and only gravity
holding the sea from the stars.

when a vision of the universe takes hold
in your mind, your soul becomes vast as the cosmos.

when the mind is silent,
everything is sacred.

like the spiral
like the lotus
like the waves
like the trees
like the stars,
we were meant to unfold.