

S.A.F.E. IN THE ARMS OF TOM BERRY

By Elisabeth (Elisabetta) Ferrero

On June 18, 1991, twenty-seven students traveled to Italy to spend six weeks participating in Saint Thomas University's ecological study abroad program, *Study Abroad for Earth* (S.A.F.E.), in Assisi, the European environmental capital. They came from colleges all over the United States, and stayed at a local family-owned hotel in the heart of Assisi, *The Posta Panoramic*, where the cook was having a fit to serve them vegetarian meals instead of their pride and joy as the Umbrian capital of veal cutlets. Many of their classes were outside, amongst the millennial olive trees overlooking the Spoleto valley, which were so dear to Francis of Assisi. In March of the same year I had called Tom Berry, whom I had never met before but I had read more than once his book, *The Dream of the Earth*. With a trembling voice I explained to him the need for a transformative education which was not happening in the classroom; also I was asking him to travel to Assisi, Italy, to become the Visiting Scholar of our S.A.F.E. program which I had just organized. After a long silence which seemed endless to me, with a soft voice Tom asked me what the dates were . . . and an incredibly transformative education was born!

Since the days of St. Francis and St. Clare, Assisi, Italy, has been a locus of activities to promote an ecologically sensitive spirituality as well as the site of educational initiatives. However, S.A.F.E. was different from other environmental study abroad programs because it had the specific intent to embrace another bioregion's culture while studying environmental and social justice with top scholars in the humanities and the sciences. Its unique feature was that the main visiting scholar was Fr. Thomas Berry and all the humanities and sciences courses were centered on his cosmology.

S.A.F.E. attracted numerous students from various colleges interested in Berry's work. Moreover, the same students would return summer after summer. The students who had participated in the Assisi program engaged regularly with other students to discuss what they had learned; many changed their majors to include an ecological component to their studies. The synergy that Thomas Berry created was contagious among all participants. Each summer he was flanked by eminent scholars in the humanities and sciences. One of the highlights in 1993 was the presence of Dr. Brian Swimme, who came to Assisi with his entire family and

often taught his classes in the fields surrounding San Damiano. One day he asked each student to get close to one of the millennial trees growing there and to feel its energy. It was an amazing sight to see thirty-five young adults quietly and deeply connected to all those olive trees!

In 1995, while S.A.F.E. was underway in Assisi, through Saint Thomas University and the Center for Respect of Life and Environment of the Humane Society of the United States, I organized and directed the first of six summer *Spirituality and Sustainability Conferences* culminating in the year 2000. Eminent leaders from various fields met once a year for a week-long series of intensive conferences/workshops in which moral questions, such as international relations, medical ethics, justice, and equity were researched and discussed; then implementations, based on solid grounding of values, were agreed upon. The title, “*Spirituality and Sustainability*,” points to its ethical dimension while at the same time there was a departure from an anthropocentric position to a holistic one, i.e., a sustainable future.

One of the important outcomes of having both the S.A.F.E. program and the conferences running alongside each other was the incredible synergy produced—students participated in the many presentations while they interfaced with the scholars. The primary purpose of these conferences was to identify and celebrate developments in religion, economics, science, education, politics, and the arts to promote eco-justice and sustainability. Thomas Berry was the keynote speaker at these conferences while the presenters and participants were from the humanities and the sciences, NGOs, and religious groups who returned summer after summer.

The presence of Fr. Berry in Assisi was not just the focal point of intellectual dialogue within the study abroad programs and the conferences, for the entire city participated in these extraordinary events taking place during the summer months. The owners of the shops around the fountain in Assisi’s main square would wait impatiently for *Padre Berry*’s presence and open smile. *The Posta*’s cook would think of new sweet treats to prepare for him. At sunset, as the colors of the sky took on muted and splendid shades in Assisi’s *piazza*, at one of the coffee shop’s outside tables, the one closest to the florist shop, one would find Tom Berry and a large circle of students, colleagues, and friends from Assisi and abroad all around him. More than once someone had to go and fetch him letting him know that the pasta was ready!! Fr. Berry loved

children. In Assisi, a few participants came with their spouses and young children. Tom spoke to them with the gentleness and kindness of a child himself, and the children flocked to him and quietly sat mesmerized by his presence through all his lectures.

Thomas Berry's presence in Assisi twenty-five years ago still echoes in me today as I ponder education and how our students' needs are not being met. What I believe is at the root of the multi-faceted problems in our youth is the total body/soul dis-connection stemming from the disconnection of the human from the natural world. Unless this two-fold connection is re-established at all levels and in all areas of education, curricular and structural changes will not amount to any real transformation in our students.

The *disorder* and the *disconnection* from the natural world represent historical breaks from Catholic theological tradition as well as from natural law (Berry 1999). Over the last three hundred years, this faulty perception of the relationship of the human to the natural world has done immeasurable harm and truly is at the root of the plagues of our times (Berry 2009). What is needed in education—as in all other institutions—is a fundamental shift to adopt a new paradigm along with a change of values and views (Berry 1999).

To reconnect the human to the natural world is obviously the solution; however, we must re-connect emotionally, not simply come forth with an intellectual critique or plan of action. We must shift from the predominant and exclusive employment of *logos* to include *pneuma*. With our polarized perception of the world today, we are unable to co-exist with nature. We must move beyond the world of dualities. Darkness needs to embrace light; reasoning and imagination must become one; female defines itself in the dialogue with male; below and above must become part of the same continuum in the spiral of life (Spretnak 2011). The East has always known that a polarized world is a fragmented one and thus a weak one; therefore, it has reconciled all opposites—something that is lacking today in our Western civilization.

My students of philosophy, as part of the service component of their course requirements, grow a few vegetables and flowers at the corner of the St. Thomas University's spacious grounds. On their first day, their impeccable white sneakers meld in the brown terrain. They farm in the worst of conditions—an old-fashioned irrigation system and only a handful of tools—yet they are “nourished” by this humble task in a

simple, non-verbal, non-linear, non-logical relationship to the natural world. I never try to make farmers out of them. I talk to my students a lot about empowerment- but little do we know, as educators, that it is the natural world alone which can open, rekindle, and nourish their hearts. Today, this re-connection to the natural world, not in fragmentary terms but as a whole being, is the number one pedagogical remedy essential for real transformation in our students. As Tom repeatedly said, the natural world is the context for the human; and the devastation of the natural world will bring about the desolation of the human, and both will perish or grow as one (Berry 2009).

By connecting with the natural world, one develops an openness which becomes compassion for all forms of life. There is so much that is mysterious in life that can only be experienced, with a deep sense of awe, by walking with gentleness and dignity towards all forms of creation. By doing so, we reconnect our heart and soul to our body—a long lost connection. We live at a time when the cult of the body prevails, and yet there is no real connection with the body because such a bond is only possible where the heart and the body meet in stillness, beyond logic. The role of the human on this Earth is a privileged one, but somehow we have trivialized our sense of being sacred. How can we continue to talk about spirituality and refer only to our human spirit?

Medieval mystics saw the interrelationship of body and soul in a universe permeated by the divine. Then, the Cartesian split of matter and spirit by removing the soul from nature and from the human body—except for the pineal gland in the human brain—not only alienated the human from the natural world, resulting in its subsequent devastation, but also impoverished our inner life, which is dependent upon the exchange of spiritual energy and wisdom from the natural world. In this exchange of energy and wisdom, the divine is evoked, and through this deep bond we are healed and transformed (Berry 2009).

This is why we cannot speak of disease of the body without understanding that the soul is also suffering, that it too is diseased and that it is no longer working in harmony but is out of sync with the body. Action, or work, has to become the work of the body *and* the soul connected and working as one. As the body and the soul work together, the person comes to trust the heart without anxiety. With a deep sense of tranquility, one has a clear perception and is open to go beyond oneself to enter into a real encounter with the world. When body and spirit are synchronized, one feels grounded in a particular place, like a tree

whose roots expand under the ground and draw nourishment from all surroundings. This causes a feeling of belonging. Everything is where it needs to be since it cannot be controlled, eradicated, or used but exists in a common destiny on this Earth.

The natural world needs to become the primary context for all forms of education (Berry 1999). Within this context, all curricula need to reflect the expression of the student through movement, sounds, words, shapes, and colors as the way by which s/he can experience what s/he is learning. The fine arts, creative writing, and music in our educational systems and programs are often separated from other disciplines--they are labeled "artistic subjects" *vis-a-vis* "cognitive disciplines." All departments and disciplines must recognize the cognitive and the artistic subjects as being equally important and indispensable in the learning process. Thus, the challenge is to incorporate them in new curricular and transformative pedagogical modules.

What we need is to embody in our educational system the very fundamental laws and principles of nature. Today, students are usually excluded from the subjects that they learn, and thus they do not see themselves and their own story as part of the wider story of what they are learning and of the universe (Berry 2009). Such awareness cannot come about only by cognitive exercises. I am proposing that story-telling, playwriting, painting, dance, music, and poetry no longer be relegated to the fine arts department but rather be incorporated in the course objectives and outcomes of all disciplines. We, as educators, must become co-creators with our students in order for a real transformation to occur in our lives and in the universe.

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