

## INTERSECTING WITH THOMAS BERRY IN THE GREAT WORK

By Matthew Fox

I open my book on the *Reinvention of Work* (1994), which antedates Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*, with a quote from poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Somewhere there is an ancient enmity between our daily life and the great work. Help me, in saying it, to understand it."

Clearly the topic of "great work" has been with me for a long time along with my commitment to creation spirituality, the tradition named by my mentor, Pere M. D. Chenu, OP, in my doctoral studies in Paris in 1968. I have felt Thomas Berry's support ever since I read his unpublished manuscripts and met him for the first time along with Brian Swimme upon his visit to my Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality at Mundelein College, Chicago, in 1981.

In addressing the issue at hand, how Berry's work intersects with my own, I will begin with the most recent instances:

1. On Mother's Day 2019, we launched a Daily Meditations project called [Dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org](http://Dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org). As I point out in the opening essay on creation spirituality, the whole purpose of the project is to respond to the pain and suffering of Mother Earth and to offer some substantive nourishment for those mystics (lovers) and prophets (warriors) to rise up and defend Mother Earth and her endangered species from apocalyptic peril.

Another reason for launching the project on Mother's Day was to trumpet the return of the Divine Feminine for truly it is patriarchy and its commitment to raping and extracting the Earth for fast profits and to elevating the reptilian brain that is so endangering the Earth. The flight from wisdom to knowledge has set fire to the Earth and our souls, or in Tom Berry's challenging words, "most of the destruction of the planet is happening at the hands of people with PhDs"—PhDs that are in knowledge, not in wisdom. (Wisdom of course is feminine not only in the Bible but around the world, so this issue too is part of patriarchy's hegemony.) I feel the Daily Meditation project is one that Tom Berry would welcome as part of his Great Work vision.

2. Another project I launched recently with two young leaders, Skylar Wilson and Jen Listug, is the Order of the Sacred Earth (OSE). Skylar Wilson studied Berry and the new cosmology in classes with Brian Swimme at the California Institute for Integral Studies. The purpose of this movement of “intergenerational wisdom” is to support and encourage those many people and movements that are arising to respond to climate change and the loss of a sense of the sacred that lies behind it. To draw together people of all spiritual traditions and none, as well as scientists, to focus more directly on solutions and spiritual sustenance to those eager to save the planet as we know it. One vow binds us together no matter what our nationality, religious affiliation, or lack thereof, age, or lifestyle: “I promise to be the best lover of Mother Earth and the best defender of Mother Earth that I can be.”

We three birthers of this order recently published a book, *Order of the Sacred Earth: An Intergenerational Vision of Love and Action* (2018), with a foreword by David Korten, an essay each by the three of us, and with short essays by Mirabai Star, Brian Swimme, Deidre Combs, and others about their vision for OSE.

OSE invites people to create “pods” or small communities to take the vow and put it into practice in their work and bioregion. So far about fifty pods have been launched, including in Peru, more to come in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, and elsewhere. (See [orderofthesacredearth.org](http://orderofthesacredearth.org).) Clearly this movement is close to Thomas Berry’s heart and vision that “ecology is a functional cosmology” and that to recover the sacred one must engage anew with the cosmos.

3. The Cosmic Mass (TCM). Tom Berry summarizes the entire work of the cosmos in one word: “In the end the universe can only be explained in terms of *celebration*. It is all an exuberant expression of existence itself.”

The Cosmic Mass, which I have been overseeing for about twenty-five years, is an effort to do just that—to celebrate our human experiences in the context of the universe using post-modern art forms such as DJ, VJ, rap, dance (which is of course the primary pre-modern form of prayer), and more. We have celebrated more than a hundred of these masses over the years in many cities in North America and abroad.

In 2018 we celebrated a TCM at the World Parliament of Religions in Toronto. The theme was “Our Sacred Earth.” In attendance were about 500 people including Buddhist monks and people of many traditions. People were profoundly moved by it and said to us, “This was the high point of the entire conference.” We also celebrated a TCM at the World Parliament in Salt Lake City in 2015 and celebrated another with the theme of “Healing Racism” at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Another TCM was held at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, with an overflow crowd. All TCMs are ecumenical, and people go deep to dance and celebrate common joy, the *Via Positiva*; common grief as we get on all sixes to grieve together in the *Via Negativa*; creativity (*Via Creativa*)—communion; and a final warrior dance (*Via Transformativa*) to send us off stronger in the struggle for justice and compassion.

The TCM echoes Tom Berry’s teachings on celebration and that of his mentor, Thomas Aquinas, who says “Sheer joy is God’s and this demands companionship.” If the reason for the universe is joy, humans should be getting better at joy and should be celebrating our joy with more passion, creativity, and abandon. Joy nurtures our passion for justice and justice; work is, after all, about inviting more to the table where joy is shared.

4. In my book *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic-Warrior for Our Times* (2014), I devote chapter two to: “The Christ of the Cosmos: Meister Eckhart Meets Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry.” Says Thomas Berry: “Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings.” Says Eckhart; “All creatures are gladly doing the best they can to express God.” Says Berry: “In the realm of living beings there is an absolute interdependence. No living being nourishes itself.” Eckhart says: “All beings are interdependent.”

Other thinkers interacting with Eckhart in that book include Rabbi Heschel; Thich Nhat Hanh; Ananda Coomaraswamy; Rumi, Hafiz, Ibn Arabi; Carl Jung (who said Eckhart gave him “the key to the unconscious”); Black Elk; Otto Rank; Adrienne Rich; Dorothee Sölle; Marguerite Porete; Karl Marx, Dorothy

Stang; John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Bruce Chilton, and others.

5. In my book *A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey* (2016), I am walking with a person whom Thomas Berry admired deeply. Indeed, in his forward to the collection of nature meditations by Thomas Merton, Berry writes, "Everywhere we find ourselves invaded by the world of the sacred. Such was the experience of Thomas Merton. . . . Eventually only our sense of the sacred will save us."

6. The archetype for the sacred in the West is the Cosmic Christ; in the East it is the Buddha Nature; in Judaism it is the image of God. Here is how Merton names it: "Everything that is is holy. . . . We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things. . . . He shines not on them but from within them."

Thomas Berry called my book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (1988) "a classic"; and I think he would be happy with my recent book with Bishop Marc Andrus on *The Stations of the Cosmic Christ* (2016) since Tom was aware that important archetypes must be practiced and not just ruminated about.

7. When I was researching my first book on Hildegard, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (1985), Tom Berry was the first person I met who knew her well. Berry was a champion of Hildegard and would be pleased that she was eventually declared not only a saint but a doctor of the church. In anticipation of that occasion and to beat the Vatican to the punch, I wrote my third book on her, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times* (2012).

In it I dedicate a chapter to her work with science, another on her shamanhood, and another on her bringing the Divine Feminine alive. Berry says that in Hildegard's theology God has an "erotic bond" with the Earth which is "a region of delight" because she sees the Creator "in the ancient manner of the fertility cults, a view she expresses in her statement that creation and creator are related as woman and man. Only thus is the earth fruitful."

8. In my book *Christian Mystics: 365 Readings and Meditations* (2011) I offer up thirty-four Christian mystics with a teaching from each plus a short commentary. I begin with Jesus and end with Thomas Berry. In one of Tom's meditations he addresses the pressing subject of how a civilization recovers a lost sense of the sacred: "We will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred [notice how he equates a sense of the sacred with the act of wonder] *only* if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things come into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality." Thus, the universe is sacrament. Compare Rabbi Heschel: "Wonder is an act in which the mind confronts the universe."

9. In my book *Sheer Joy: Conversations with Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality* (1992), I descholasticize Aquinas by interviewing him (thanks to an Apple computer I was able to footnote every sentence Aquinas uttered); and I translate many books by Aquinas never before translated into English (or German or French or Italian). Tom Berry was very devoted and indebted to Thomas Aquinas who was his namesake. While I heard Tom speak many times, I do not remember one time when he did not cite Thomas Aquinas. One quote he loved was this one: "The whole universe together participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being whatsoever."

10. Tom Berry held deep respect for Indigenous traditions. He writes: "Indigenous peoples and the classical civilization in the vital periods of their creativity situate themselves deep within this sacred order of the universe."

Much of my life has been graced by Indigenous teachers. One of them was Buck Ghosthorse, a Lakota teacher who taught in my master's program at Holy Names College for three years and led our faculty, staff, and students in many sweat lodges. When he left to found his own community, he gifted me with his sacred pipe with which he prayed for twenty-four years. He led me in a vision quest which I undertook during the year I was silenced, and also invited me to participate in several sundances at his community near Goldendale, Washington.

Part of the tradition of Indigenous spirituality is the role of the shaman and Tom Berry said more than once that the world needs “fewer priests and fewer professors and more shamans.” He surprised me when he wrote the following about my work:

In identifying the overall context of his work, Matt is sometimes considered to be fulfilling a prophetic role and this designation does indicate an aspect of the work of Matt. Indeed he has critiqued the church in the light of its own most relevant intellectual, spiritual, and social exponents in the past. Yet there is, I believe, a more critical role that Matt is fulfilling within the Christian community, the role of shaman. While both prophet and shaman have special roles in their relation to the human community, the shaman is more comprehensive in his field of consciousness. The prophet speaks somewhat directly in the name of God, the prophet is a message bearer, the prophet is interpreter of historical situations, and the prophet critiques the ruling powers.

The shaman functions in a less personal relationship with the divine. He is more cosmological, more primordial, and personally more inventive in the source of his insight and his power. Matt speaks of his teaching as creation spirituality, it seems to me, because he feels the need to understand the deep experience of the human soul within the sacred dimension of the universe itself. That Matt has consistently used the word “creation” in identifying his work indicates the cosmic orientation of his thinking. By the term “creation spirituality” he turns the Western mind away from its exclusive redemption fixation to the more primordial experience available for the Western soul in the universe itself.

11. Thomas Berry taught Asian religions for years. Recently I wrote a book with Lama Tsomo called *The Lotus & The Rose: A Conversation between Tibetan Mysticism & Mystical Christianity* (2018). This book is a transcript of dialogues we shared at Joan Halifax’s Zen Center in Santa Fe; at Stanford University; at the Jung Center in Houston; and at Lama Tsomo’s home in Montana. I believe Tom would consider these dialogues to be very much within his purview—the bringing together of the wisdom East and West.

He said as much in his review of my book *One River, Many Wells: Wisdom Springing from Global Faith Traditions* (2000). “[Fox] has given us abundant selections from the spiritual literature of the Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and the Indigenous Peoples of Africa and America to illuminate our understanding of Creation, the Divine, the Human Experience of the Divine, and our way into the future. Out of these sources, and with reference to the discovery of an emergent universe by contemporary science, he has, it seems, created a new mythic context for leading us out of our contemporary religious and spiritual confusion into a new clarity of mind and peace of soul, by affirming rather than abandoning any of our traditional beliefs.”

12. I borrowed a phrase from Berry for the subtitle of my book on reinventing education called *The A.W.E. Project: Reinventing Education, Reinventing the Human* (2006). People familiar with Tom’s strong critique of academia (he spoke of “academic barbarism”) will recognize his phrase “reinventing the human” and I gave him an appropriate shout-out in the book for inventing that stunning phrase.

Tom was a great supporter of our efforts at the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS) and then the University of Creation Spirituality (UCS) to deconstruct Western education and bring the cosmos and the mysticism it aroused more fully into the learning experience. When the Vatican silenced me for a year in its continuing effort to shut down ICCS, Tom Berry wrote a strong article on our behalf saying:

What’s being done at ICCS is too important to permit ourselves to be distracted either by fundamentalist iconoclasm or by bureaucratic procedures. Let’s get on with the historical task assigned to ourselves and our generation: the task of establishing a religious sensitivity to the divine as communicated to us through the natural world. . . . ICCS is awakening Christian consciousness to its religious and moral responsibility for the fate of the earth.”

Not only did Tom visit frequently to lecture in our ICCS and UCS programs but one graduate of our program, Father Sean

McDonagh, played a prominent role in the authorship of Pope Francis's acclaimed encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*. All of our graduates, so many of whom are doing marvelous work in the world, including eco-martyr Sister Dorothy Stang, were influenced by Berry's teachings received in our programs.

13. Thomas Berry plays a prominent place in my book *Creativity: Where the Divine and the Human Meet* (2002). Asking the question "Where does creativity come from?" I turn to Berry who names *wildness* as the "wellspring of creativity."

Interestingly, he once wrote this about me:

When I think of Matt Fox, I recall a passage written by Henry David Thoreau in his essay on *Walking*: "In wildness is the preservation of the world." For there is something wild in Matt, something primordial, a realization that humans are not here to control but to participate in the wonders of those vast cosmic phenomena beyond all human understanding. These experiences evoke within us an overwhelming delight and thoughts so profound that their meaning is revealed to us only in our dreams.

These thirteen instances name just some of the intersections of Tom Berry's and my work over the years. Needless to say his friendship and teachings have been special to my life and work which I can only hope has been and is a continuing part of the "Great Work."