

CONTINUING THE GREAT WORK

By Greg Futch

Timing. Is. *Everything*. Or so it would seem. As the young child's brain must reach a capacity for abstract thought before it can happen, so each of us comes to a time of readiness for fresh insight and deeper wisdom. And when I encountered Thomas Berry and his work, my mind and heart were prepared for his message.

I remember when I was attending Georgia Institute of Technology as a freshman in 1968, I began to sense that engineering and the space program were not to be my destiny. I realized I was as interested in human psycho-dynamics as I was in aero-dynamics. So I switched schools and majors and worked toward a psychology degree. I was always curious and interested in many things. But two other realities besides psychology came to be dominant in my experience and in my searching. These two were the natural world on the one hand, and religion, or more accurately spirituality, on the other.

I graduated in 1971 from the University of Texas with a B.A. in Psychology. The Vietnam War, civil rights struggles, and the counter-culture all affected me deeply. But I was not drafted (lottery number too high), and I struggled to find a direction and a vocation. My father passed in 1978, and I, newly married, returned to Atlanta to help my mother, and to take a job with Delta Air Lines. Three years later my spiritual searching led me to begin seminary at Emory University, and the synchronicities and connections continued. It became more and more evident to me that psychological and spiritual realities were not in separate boxes, and that any honest therapy or spiritual direction had to account for both. Humans are integrated whole beings, and these fundamental dimensions of human "nature" must be brought into conversation and communion, within oneself, and within the search for truth in general.

The third great passion of mine, nature, had always been a source of inspiration and solace. But in the latter half of the 20th century, it was also becoming a source of concern and grief. Rather, it was humanity's treatment of the natural world that was becoming more and more unbearable. It seemed then (and now) that our fossil-fueled culture was destroying our home planet and numbing our sense of the sacred. Upon my family's return to Austin, Texas, in 1995, I found a pathway that brought all three of my passions together. A progressive Methodist

congregation in Austin, Trinity United Methodist Church, was led by a pastor, Sid Hall, who was open to all the same issues and concerns that I have mentioned. Through him, I met a nature-based teacher and mentor, Dr. Will Taegel, an ordained Methodist minister who was deeply influenced by Native American spirituality.

With the invitation of Rev. Sid and the associate pastor there, I began to lead a succession of classes on topics ranging from John Wesley to the works of Richard Rohr and spirituality in its various expressions. After being involved with Will Taegel and the Earthtribe community he had helped create and nurture, I decided to lead a class on their work, and on the sweat lodge in particular. At one of our class meetings, a woman asked me if I had heard of the “Ecozoic Center.” And with that, I was introduced to Thomas Berry!

This happened in 2003, over 15 years ago now. Prodded by the woman’s question, I looked up the efforts of Herman Greene and his colleagues at what came to be called the Center for Ecozoic Studies. Through their website, I learned more about Thomas Berry and began my long-term exploration of his work. Many currents come together in the writings and the teachings of Berry. The list would include: evolutionary concepts of nature, humans and consciousness, respect for all the great wisdom traditions, an integrated story (the New Story!) of how science and the great religions are complementary in their descriptions of reality, a profound critique of industrial and modern societies, and even suggestions and signs for the way forward.

At homes and churches, outside and indoors, I have had the privilege of guiding discussions and contemplations of the massive changes ahead necessary to maintain a habitable planet. These changes will entail transformation of consciousness, priorities, and, particularly, the human heart. Are we up to it? I am not sure. As Thomas writes in *The Dream of the Earth*,

If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality.

Thomas Berry is a pivotal figure in the spiritual and intellectual history of the human experience. Like one of his major influences, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, he has produced a grand story of the evolution of

the universe, but with an urgency and a passion befitting the awesome, even fearsome possibilities developing on planet Earth.

There are a few particular points Berry has made which have deeply influenced me. “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects” is one of the most important. Our Western model of scientific truth-seeking has been shaped by dualism in many forms. “Subject vs. object” is the foundation. And there was the subsequent impulse to see matter and all reality—except plants and animals—as inanimate. One step further in our Western history was to see the Earth and its treasures as objects for use and exploitation. Hence, the loss of that sense of the sacred which is common in Indigenous people. Thus Berry, following earlier nature prophets, sought to break the industrial mindset, the trance of exploitation, and ultimately, consumerism as a measure of happiness. This analysis from Berry fit with all of the ongoing concerns and insights of those like me who saw the destructive dark side of the dominant worldview. It informs the work I do in small groups and in my interactions with community and the world in general.

The other major insight most critical to me is Berry’s awareness of how personal salvation became dominant in Western Christianity, eclipsing the view articulated in Genesis 1:31: “And God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good.” So the emphasis on personal salvation enforced the idea of escaping the fallen Earth and its vale of tears to find true liberation and happiness in the next world. Once again, though not the first to see these connections, Thomas clearly presented them to show the big changes needed in cosmology, the relations between humanity and the rest of creation, and the meaning of salvation itself. Matthew Fox and his critical work on Creation Spirituality paralleled Berry’s breakthroughs. I believe it is no exaggeration to say that without Thomas Berry’s creative and inspiring labors, our Western religious world view would still be distorted and destructive to our only home planet.

The range of people who have been touched by Berry’s work is immense. And many of these very important folks have also influenced me: Joanna Macy, Bill McKibben, Bill Plotkin, and so many others. A few years ago, I led a discussion of Bill Plotkin’s book, *Nature and the Human Soul*, and was glad to see that he had interviewed Berry as a representative of those who have reached the stage of late elderhood, the last point on the wheel of life Plotkin describes. At this point in humanity’s journey, we need all the elders and mentors we can get!

I am so grateful for all the individuals and organizations that carry on the Great Work inspired by Thomas Berry. The timing, at least for me, of encountering his work and incorporating it into my own humble efforts, was magical. There is so much more to be done.

So, how do we thank Thomas? I believe he would be most gratified if we continued to contribute to that Great Work, which has as its cornerstone the life and work of Father Thomas Berry.