

THE LEGACY OF THOMAS BERRY IN MY LIFE

By Alice Loyd

Answering the question “How am I taking forward the work of Thomas Berry?” is easy to do in a superficial way. Since 2001 I have been an officer, editor, and writer for the Center for Ecozoic Studies, an organization founded on Thomas’s ideas. I’ve assumed leadership roles in several other non-profits concerned with environmental protection, primarily climate change. I’ve practiced organic food growing and flower gardening through the years, and recently moved with one of my daughters into an intentional community where we are learning to practice egalitarian social structures. All of these efforts fit well into Thomas’s definition of the Great Work.

For me, however, the most important work of carrying forward Thomas’s vision has been done internally. Of all his teachings—of all the characteristics of the ecozoic that he set forth—I think the most fundamental and most challenging to cultural assumptions is the subject-to-subject quality of relationship with all beings. To chase down and look squarely at my stances toward all others as revealed by my actions, especially my behavior toward Earth’s other-than-human membership, has been a continuing endeavor.

Before I encountered his teachings, I had an experience I count as a landmark in this work of understanding. During a bout of high fever, I heard a steady stream of words that were an orderly summation of the meaning of life. What seemed an enlightenment arrived in beautiful sentences, one after another, over what seemed like hours. I longed to repeat them as they arrived, but there was no time and I was too weak. I kept a tape recorder by my bed, and as they still filled my mind, as soon as I was able I began to speak them aloud. Or rather, I tried to do that. What seemed to be a well-formed thought would present itself in memory, but it would not be captured by mouth. Although the meaning of the aural vision was clear, I couldn’t seem to speak it with my vocabulary. The words vanished as if written with disappearing ink as soon as my speech skills tried to take them in charge.

This new, uncapturable understanding wasn’t really foreign to my previous world view, but it organized what I had unconsciously believed and made it more available to consciousness. The perspective was foreign to the culture I lived in, however, and for that reason I think it had remained less conscious until that event.

It felt important for me to pass this important message on to others, so I spent the following months at the computer trying to write a book. Maybe the picture was too big, or maybe the state of mind in which I received the message—a near trance—wasn't accessible to the part of my brain that deals with language. Or maybe English has evolved to obscure the truths I was trying to convey. When I wanted to characterize the world of my vision, for example, I discovered that English does not have a word for the opposite of violence as a way of life. "Peaceful" is not adequate. I was forced to say, "not violent," non-violent, because English lacks words for naming what the culture doesn't endorse. English was developed and has served well to describe a world characterized by hierarchy, commodification, exploitation, and physical force.

While I was struggling with this writing project, I began to read a book that had come into my hands prior to the flu experience, *The Dream of the Earth* by someone named Thomas Berry. I had found it on a "Free" table at a garage sale and had picked it up thinking it was by Wendell Berry. Why I started reading it at this time is another instance of the mysterious guide holding my hand. The reading was a remarkable experience. Thomas offered a view so harmonious with the understanding I was trying to articulate, and he said it so beautifully that I felt a burden lift from my shoulders. This burden to explain—a task which for me had proved impossible—had been carried easily and eloquently by someone more qualified to bear it. I can still feel the relief.

First my fever-borne vision occurred, then *The Dream of the Earth*. I believe Alfred North Whitehead said that philosophy tells us what we already know to be true. These experiences became my philosophy. What Thomas did was put my formless beliefs into words that fit the historical setting of our times, enabling me to think and more deliberately act from an increasingly conscious and scientifically accurate worldview.

Several years passed before I met him. When I knew he would be at a meeting I was going to attend, I took the book with me but was too shy to do more than show him how many passages I had highlighted. In fact I never told him the function he had performed for me. He was always surrounded by people more casually able to converse with him, and even on one occasion when we had time alone, I couldn't see how to move dialogue to the depth my thoughts would require. I would have needed a number of such opportunities.

I don't think either Thomas or I needed that conversation, however, since I'm sure he was aware of his importance to many people who never

spoke to him. What matters more is whether I've made progress in my effort to live out the beliefs he and I shared, and whether all of us who carry his legacy are able to spread them to a wider circle.

The teaching that has seemed to me most crucial to apply, *that everything in the universe has agency*, Thomas expressed this way: "Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." I've wanted to stop objectifying other members of the communion, nonhumans in particular, and in the same vein to resist being objectified by other humans.

Perhaps because I grew up in a society in which white men held the apparent power, but also because I am not highly placed in society, I have been slow to see myself as having power and to learn how to wield it appropriately. My relationships with other life forms I can illustrate by my dilemma as a gardener: How do I manage plants, soil elements, and soil organisms in ways that grant them their proper autonomy? What I have been striving toward is to shape my human-with-human and human-with-other-than-human relationships to match my theory, which says all members of the web are equally important, and that each one must enjoy full functioning in order for the web to fully function.

Humans in my part of the world and from my lineage have been acting from erroneous understandings for a long time, and we've assumed almost despotic powers over other life forms and over most other humans. We've been like Colin in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Colin is a ten-year-old chronic invalid who is on the edge of making the effort to achieve good health. The heroine Mary, who is also ten years old and has been making that effort a little longer, has just observed him dealing imperiously with Martha, one of the household servants. Afterward, Mary tells him, "Once in India I saw a boy who was a rajah. He had rubies and emeralds and diamonds stuck all over him. He spoke to his people just as you spoke to Martha. Everybody had to do everything he told them—in a minute. I think they would have been killed if they hadn't."

She concludes by observing, "How different you are from Dickon!" When Colin asks, "Who is Dickon?" Mary tells him,

He is Martha's brother. He is twelve years old. He is not like anyone else in the world. He can charm foxes and squirrels and birds. . . . He says it's because he lives on the moor so much and he knows their ways. He says he feels sometimes as if he was a bird or a rabbit himself, he likes them so. . . . He knows all about eggs and nests, and he knows where foxes and badgers and otters

live. He keeps them secret so that other boys won't find their holes and frighten them. He knows about everything that grows or lives on the moor.

Most people of my locale and lineage behave more like the young rajah than like Dickon.

Even after years of trying to express the more Dickon-like ideas in my own words, I still cannot do it in terms natural to everyday conversation. My best precise effort at the moment would include these sentences: "Earth is organized so that each member is empowered to be itself and thus contribute to the good of the whole. There is agency without hierarchy. Authority is distributed throughout, originating from a center that is nowhere confined or separate."

I think Thomas's "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" statement is a provocative way to offer that concept, and I cannot think of a more important correction to the worldview that is causing so much grief at the moment. Putting the implications of that teaching into action is a specific way to practice the more familiar Golden Rule, and the extent to which society succeeds or fails in this practice will determine how close we come to terminal disaster.