

A SENSE OF THE SACRED

By Marian Van Eyk McCain

I first heard Thomas Berry's name in 1990, when I was living in Melbourne, Australia. I was invited by a colleague, psychiatrist Dr. David Bathgate, to join a newly formed organization called the Climbing River Foundation and I attended a small group meeting about it at the University of Melbourne.

At that meeting, David talked about Thomas Berry and his ideas. Humans, he explained, have gone down the wrong path, focusing all our energies on our own human culture, while totally ignoring the needs of that greater culture of which we are an intrinsic part—the ecosystems of the planet that sustains us. And in our increasingly secular world, we have lost a sense of the sacred. The stories we tell about who we are and how we got here do not sustain us at a spiritual level. We need a new story. These ideas resonated strongly with me and I immediately joined the Foundation.

One of the first tasks we tackled was to establish a network of groups based around the various professions, exploring the ways in which practitioners—psychologists, teachers, medical personnel and so on—might bring the sacred back into their professional lives and disciplines. The group I headed up, called “Psychology and the Sacred” met regularly at my house for several years and our wide-ranging discussions were stimulating and fascinating. Meanwhile, my own work as a psychotherapist was deepening as I began to incorporate more and more spiritually related issues into my sessions with clients. Several of the people in my Climbing River group became my close friends and have remained so to this day. With them, I set up a new group practice, incorporating transpersonal psychotherapy, Jungian dreamwork, art therapy, and several bodywork modalities, all infused with a sense of the sacred.

My membership in Climbing River affected the course of my life in another major way also. David and one of his colleagues at the University of Melbourne organized a public showing of Brian Swimme's video series “Canticle to the Cosmos,” the first comprehensive telling of our true creation story, as revealed by science, from the Big Bang to what Swimme and Berry have called the Ecozoic era. I was enthralled. Watching the shots taken in Brian Swimme's classroom, I felt envy for the students to whom he was telling the story. “What an inspiring teacher,” I said to the friend who was with me. “I would love to be in that class.”

Little did I know that six years later I would get my wish. Because in 1996, when family circumstances took me to San Francisco, Brian Swimme was teaching Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness at the graduate school I had attended in the 1980s, the California Institute of Integral Studies, and as an alumna I was entitled to audit that course for a very low fee. I jumped at the chance. It was one of the most stimulating and enjoyable educational experiences of my life. Towards the end of the course, Brian brought in a guest lecturer for one of the sessions, and to my delight it was Thomas Berry. The thing I remember most about him was his quiet, gentle, unassuming manner. After the class I got the chance to shake his hand and to tell him how happy I was to have this opportunity to meet him in person and to hear him speak.

In 1998, I returned to my native England. After forty years of living in Australia and the United States, I knew very few people here. One day in London, as I was walking along Piccadilly, I wandered into the porch of St. James's Church, where there was a display of pamphlets, and there I discovered one about an organization called GreenSpirit. Inspired originally by a series of talks by Matthew Fox, GreenSpirit had started life the previous year, right there at St James's, as the UK branch of the Association for Creation Centred Spirituality but later changed its official name to GreenSpirit to avoid any confusion with creationism.

With the discovery of GreenSpirit, not only had I come home to the land of my birth but to the same sort of spiritual community that I had experienced with Climbing River. It was not long before I was invited to become a trustee and a member of the governing council of the organization. And some while after that, I became co-editor of the *GreenSpirit Magazine*, published three times a year.

Since I was now long retired from my psychotherapy practice, GreenSpirit gradually became the primary channel for my work. Especially when, in 2008, I took on the task of editing, on behalf of the organization, an anthology of writings about Earth-based spirituality. The title of the book was *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness*. With an introduction and commentary by me and a foreword by *Resurgence Magazine* editor Satish Kumar, it featured contributions from twenty-nine inspirational writers, including Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme, Emma Restall Orr, David Korten, and Neil Douglas-Klotz.

I was delighted when Rupert Sheldrake, the biologist and author of *A New Science of Life*, endorsed my work with these words: "Never before

have so many important ideas on these subjects been assembled between the covers of a single book.”

On January 17th, 2009, I received the following email message from the late Margaret Berry:

Marian,

Herewith Thomas Berry’s commendation and blessing on your impressive work, *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness*: “Marian Van Eyk McCain’s *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness* offers numerous healing and inspiring insights; notably, that Earth and the universe are primary divine revelation, a truth to be transmitted to our children as early and effectively as possible.”

All best wishes,

Dr. Margaret Berry (Thomas’s sister and aide)

Thomas died that same year, on the first of June. How overjoyed I was that he had lived long enough to give this book of ours his personal blessing.

At the same time as I was working on the book, one of my fellow council members, Sister Mary June Raymond, was working on a book project of her own. A long-time fan of Thomas Berry, June was very keen for *GreenSpirit* to publish a collection of her favourite quotes from his various writings. As a Sister of Notre Dame, her idea was that such a collection would be not only an inspiring thing to read but also a beautiful tool for Christians who practise a contemplative form of meditation.

Like me, June had had the privilege of meeting with Thomas Berry in person. This is how she described the encounter:

Thomas Berry was seventy-nine when I saw him. Like the ancient mariner he was “long and lean and brown” and had an urgent message about creation and how we abuse her. I was one of about sixty people who had come to hear him speak at the Jesuit-run Campion Centre outside Boston. He spoke slowly, sometimes rather too quietly, but fluently and without notes. Although he was then regarded as a leading church authority in America and was even invited to Clinton’s inauguration, Berry was remarkably low key and approachable. So it was that when during the lunch break I saw him walking alone with his “brown bag” of lunch, I felt able to go up to the great man and start a conversation. “Why don’t we find somewhere to have

lunch together?” he said, and so it came about that I ate my sandwiches with him. As we talked, I was particularly struck by his remarkable brown eyes, the encyclopaedic knowledge combined with depth of the answers he gave, and his delightful, dry humour.

While Berry avoided controversy and had a great gentleness of manner, he was not afraid to speak his mind and his message was uncompromising and hard hitting. A Passionist priest and a cultural historian, he had for thirty years been preaching the necessity of a new way of relating to the Earth and had only begun to be taken seriously within the previous decade. His message to us that day was that our tradition, which is patriarchal and based on the Judeo-Greek model, is “valid but flawed.” Because it relies on a separation of the material and spiritual worlds it is now leading to the destruction of both, for while we do not respect the sacredness of creation we inevitably exploit and destroy it; and when our impoverished environment can no longer reveal the divine our inner spiritual world loses its primary revelatory experience. Berry saw the cosmos as both our primary revelation and our primary sacred community, and our awareness of the divine as therefore directly dependent on the variety, beauty, and majesty of our environment.

Our life style, he told us, is “destructive, addictive, pathological, and paralysing” and we are committed to this momentum to such an extent that in America, in the name of “development,” people are actually subsidised to continue the destruction of the few remaining healthy areas of land.

I found particularly challenging Berry’s anger with the institutions that he considered most to blame, namely the universities and the churches, for they are entrusted with the education of future generations and yet they continue to present the way forward in terms of exploitation and indifference towards the environment, while the planet herself is mortally sick. I was left with a deepened commitment to establishing my own inner freedom from the addictions of our age and a heightened sense of responsibility for the values we hand on in the name of Christianity.

June put together her collection of quotes, along with an introduction. In 2010, with approval from Thomas’s literary heirs, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of the Thomas Berry Foundation, our GreenSpirit Publications team published the little book *Meditations with*

Thomas Berry, which is available from Amazon in both paperback and Kindle versions.

Since that time, our team has produced nine more small books on green spiritual themes, all of which we see as part of our contribution to the Great Work. We have more books in the pipeline. And although the publications--plus running a book review website that focuses on books about green spirituality--are my main contribution these days, the work that GreenSpirit does takes many forms. For example, one member left a bequest that enabled a permanent "cosmic walk" to be constructed in the grounds of Winchester University so that people can rediscover the Universe Story by walking it. Like our Celtic ancestors, our GreenSpirit local groups hold seasonal ceremonies and celebrations to remind us of our connection to the Earth's cycles. One such group goes into schools to talk about green spirituality. We sponsor events on green spiritual themes and liaise with other organizations who share our aims.

Above all, we serve as a supportive community for people of all faiths and none who are working in many and varied ways on behalf of Gaia, our precious planet. On our website and in our magazine, we describe ourselves as follows:

GreenSpirit is a network of people who celebrate the human spirit in the context of our place in the natural world and Earth's own evolutionary journey. Our radical vision brings together the rigour of science, the creativity of artistic expression, the passion of social action, and the wisdom of spiritual traditions of all ages. Attracting those of many faith traditions, we are a body of people who believe that human life has both an ecological and a spiritual dimension. Together we:

- celebrate all existence as deeply connected and sacred
- understand humanity as integral to the planetary landscape rather than its distinguishing feature
- find inspiration in the traditions of Earth-based peoples and Celtic spirituality
- are exploring the unfolding story of the universe and promote common ground between people in the context of this vision
- seek to redress the balance of masculine and feminine and befriend darkness as well as light

- create ceremonies and celebrations which connect us more consciously with the cycle and seasons of the Earth
- seek a more just, sustainable, and peaceful way of life in harmony with the Earth.

So once again, just as it was two decades ago, my work – and that of my colleagues in the organization most dear to me – is all about finding ways to bring to our human lives a sensing of the sacred, loving and honouring this beautiful Earth, and thinking and acting ecocentrically. The memory and legacy of Thomas Berry continues to inspire us all.