

CARITAS – A THOMAS BERRY MEMOIR

By Patricia Monahan

I first learned of Thomas Berry from Miriam Therese MacGillis, OP, at Genesis Farm. I discovered that Thomas Berry lived just fifteen minutes from Mount Vernon, New York, and I enjoyed many visits during the time he was writing his Riverdale Papers and after. While I never felt worthy of this great mystic's time, he welcomed me with the same gracious hospitality as notable scholars and world leaders. He always encouraged me to "do something for the children," and under his guidance with another teacher, Margarita Urrea, I started an ecology group called "Kids for the Earth," for middle school students and later elementary school children. The guiding principles of the universe—Respect, Differentiation, Honor, Subjectivity, Celebration, and Communion, were at the heart of our program. The kids got it! I would say that over the years these principles have shaped and inspired my own consciousness as a non-canonical religious who strives to embody the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph—Uniting All in God's Love. As a 21st century religious, "our charism sends us into the world as continuous acts of love, a love that is active, a love that is steadfast. It forms bridges, makes connections easier and facilitates life for others enabling them also to stir up love in our world."

In that spirit I offer a memoir of an encounter with a little robin, "Caritas," who taught me that, indeed, all is one!

Caritas

Every summer I enjoy a week in the Catskills at a family resort, The Thompson House, located in Windham, New York. As is my morning practice, I headed off for my walk along the mountain road just before seven. There had been a blustery thunderstorm the night before that broke the humidity, so the air was fresh and invigorating. Along the path I noticed a helpless little bird beside a bush, just a day or two old. There were no trees nearby, but after searching a cluster of large rhododendron bushes, I discovered a toppled nest deep beside one. I waited to see if the mother bird might return but it was soon obvious that she had abandoned the nest.

I picked up the tiny creature. Its eyes were closed, and its featherless body trembled in my hand. There were a few downy feathers around its neck but no feathers on its delicate blue wings. Debbie, the owner of

the resort, prepared a small carton lined with toweling. “Pat, I’m afraid there’s not much hope for this one,” she warned. Passersby agreed. “Let nature take its course,” they suggested.

I carried the fragile fledgling back to my room and dripped some water on its yellow beak. The bird swallowed. I repeated it. I marveled at this fragile creature in my hand. Its eyes remained closed, but its heart throbbed with life. I crushed a crust of wheat bread into the water and encouraged it to open its mouth. Suddenly the beak opened wide as I offered tiny bits of moist bread. I sensed a zest for life and named her Caritas—Latin for love—Cari for short.

Barbara, the matron, suggested that I get some “cat” food at the local market, so I picked up a can of IAM’s tuna pâté and returned to my room. Cari ate heartily. By afternoon, I checked and lo and behold Cari’s eyes had opened. She feasted on the tuna pâté on and off day and night. Life was awakening before my very eyes. The warmth and the caress of my fingers rested gently over her like a mother’s protective wing. I doubt she would have survived the night alone in a box of tissues despite the best of intentions. Life craves relationship.

It was a long night for both of us but at about 5:00 a.m. I switched on the bed lamp. Sensing my presence, Cari began chirping, her beak wide open. I reached for the tuna pate and fed her. She couldn’t get enough. When she had her fill, that was it; she quieted down. What a delight to find her alive! I showered, dressed, and went to breakfast. Meanwhile Cari drifted off to sleep with a full belly of, of all things, cat food.

After breakfast, I situated my camp chair along the riverbank where we could hear birds and enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. I placed her in the grass beside me. She was all legs compared to her tiny body, but she managed to shuffle around on the flat of her legs. She could not stand upright but she was full of life. It was amazing how we bonded day to day. She’d fall off to sleep resting her head on her wing in the palm of my hand. It was an awesome experience for me.

Days passed until Saturday arrived; time to go home. I settled Cari in the carton and drove the three hours back to Mount Vernon, pausing each hour to feed her. I stopped at Petco to inquire about food for a baby bird. They recommended baby bird formula which needed to be heated in order to release the enzymes Cari needed to grow. After a couple of days of formula, her wings started filling in with lovely brown and tan feathers and her breast whitened with brownish spots. The orange feath-

ers under her wings revealed she was indeed a robin. What a beauty . . . this little love!

The next morning, I took Cari up to the school campus where she shuffled around in the grass within earshot of birds, particularly robins. I kept her as close as possible to nature. Monday to Friday Cari was with me in Brentwood, Long Island, when I visited my friend, Maria, who had a large deck where we sat out each day.

By mid-week Cari was gaining strength and Wednesday morning she lifted herself up and stood upright on both legs. With that, she began to hop about, toppling over at first. Little by little she learned to hop up on the lower chair frame and jump off. The next day I placed her on the top step of the deck and encouraged her to hop down. The first hop was an awkward flop. Cari shook herself off and tried the second step. This time her wings fluttered instinctively as she almost flew. The third step she fluttered down, as well as the fourth and fifth. I walked up the steps and encouraged her to fly up. The first step she crashed into because she was too close to the step. She backed up, made the step, but slipped off. Little by little she discovered her wings. Like a child learning to walk, she was learning to fly. Every day we went out for flying lessons, and as her wings strengthened, she flew higher and farther. By the end of the week Cari refused hand feeding and I returned to Petco for live mealy worms. Cari was now feeding herself and becoming more independent. It was amazing to watch the progression of growth in this little robin over a period of just ten days.

After the week with Maria, I drove home but I knew I could not keep Cari confined in my apartment with my curious cat, Holly, who studied her through the bird cage with great interest. My friend Beth recommended that I contact the local Audubon chapter for a wildlife specialist. It turned out that Lorraine Izzo, a certified Audubon specialist, lived just a few blocks away. Lorraine welcomed Cari and placed her in a large bird cage where she could move about freely. I kept in touch each week to see how Cari was progressing. Over the course of several weeks, Cari detached from human contact as she grew into a gorgeous robin with a long tail and a sleek graceful body. Lorraine called to ask if I would like to release Cari at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. On September 20, 2012, exactly eight weeks from the date I found Cari, I took her to a large stand of trees and let her fly free. She bolted from the container and soared to a nearby oak tree. I used my zoom lens to

capture a few pictures of her gazing at the sky and listening attentively to surrounding birds. I hoped and prayed she would meet up with some robins who would welcome her into the neighborhood.

After enjoying the fall Monet Garden exhibit that day, I returned to the spot where I released Cari. I wondered if she would be where I left her, maybe she would be on the ground. She was nowhere to be seen. She had flown off. As I turned to leave, I looked down and discovered a perfectly formed bird's nest lined with soft white downy feathers. I imagined a thank you from Cari and treasure it still.

My friend and mentor Thomas Berry taught me, among many things, "We are actually in a mystical rapport with the budding trees, the song-birds, the graciousness of the sun, the amazing diversity of it all, but we need to acknowledge the sacredness of relationship, our communion with Earth, the universe, and the divine."