

HOW THOMAS BERRY CHANGED MY LIFE

By Alwyn Moss

Concerning how Thomas Berry strengthened my will, clarified my understanding of reality, and helped me know what work I needed to do.

Thomas Berry, whom I came to know in my later years, carried himself with simplicity and humility yet was a bearer, as I was to learn, of the power of Truth. This has become more and more evident since his death at 94 in 2009 as the message in his great books has spread ever more widely. His presence in the world is in motion today with increasing effect.

Having made the choice to move from the big city in which I grew up to more rural areas, I was ripe for greater changes but did not know what that might mean. It was at Camp New Hope outside Chapel Hill in central North Carolina that I encountered Thomas Berry by attending lectures on ecology and related topics at events run by his brother, Jim Berry. Thomas was there, so was I, and somehow we sat together more than once.

I am so grateful for the ways in which my life and work have been altered by my good fortune to have become one of his many “companions” by sharing nature and by reading his books. It did not take me long to recognize the significance of his work and the profound thought that he gave to the world.

When Thomas wrote, “We will not save what we do not love. It is also true we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred,” he referred to the sacredness of the community of life. He felt that the determining factor for the human species (and all others) at this time is “whether or not we will recognize that there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human.”

It was this understanding, the truth of which touched me so deeply, that motivated me to take action for the natural areas near me with more energy and commitment than I had imagined I had. When I realized that 220 acres of a beautiful old farm across from where I lived in southern Virginia was in imminent danger of being developed as a major sewer line and large-scale development, to my surprise I found myself speaking, writing, and organizing on behalf of that piece of Earth I had

come to know and love. I was working harder than ever before, and it felt so right. As I called out to others, many responded. After intensive efforts over three years, we succeeded in saving what I and now they too saw as sacred and essential. The old Brown Farm became Heritage Park, available to all.

My writing resulted in over fifty published commentaries, including a pamphlet entitled “To Love the Earth, A New Way of Becoming Human.” Thomas’s teachings gave me the strength and will to keep working for the sacred community. He wrote, “The present urgency is to begin thinking within the context of the whole planetThat the human and other components of Earth form a single community of life is the central issue of the Great Work.”

In the past few years I joined the long struggle to defeat two pipelines, Mountain Valley Pipeline and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, both highly destructive to the intrinsic beauty and health of this part of Appalachia where I live. Becoming part of this strong movement to defeat these projects and preserve the original ecology felt essential to me because it has already affected not only the waters, the forests, and the diversity of life, but also ourselves –because as Thomas Berry phrased it so magnificently:

What happens to the non-human will happen to the human. What happens to the outer world happens to the inner world. If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished. Without the soaring birds, the great forests, the sounds and colorations of the insects, the free-flowing streams, the flowering fields, the sight of the clouds by day and the stars by night, we become impoverished in all that makes us human.

Most of my visits with Thomas in those years when I lived near him in his hometown of Greensboro took place at what he called “the Grill,” actually a kind of pub where he was a familiar person, and I was too after a while. He would settle down into our booth and begin speaking of the immense journey of the universe as a person deep within the epic story, not as an outside observer. He and the great story had become one in his vast soul.

I kept a pen on a chain around my neck and a notebook in my pocket to take notes. If I ever forgot the notebook Thomas would pass a paper

napkin across the table for me to write on without missing a beat in what he was saying. As an example of such casual talk he said one day:

From the beginning, there was the mystery that is still a Mystery—one that began a sacred story of the universe with a psychic-spiritual inner dimension as well as a physical-material outer dimension. Without both dimensions, the story would have no meaning; with both, there is integrity and we have been a part of both from the first primordial flaring forth.

As I struggled to grasp his meaning, I derived how his vision was of a universe groping forward in its long slow evolution through a sequence of irreversible transformations and crises. And in this way over the months and years of being in touch with Thomas Berry, I also began to understand how the early Earth communities of peoples, creatures, and plants were immersed in “a mystical rapport within a sense of the sacred” that made them one in a bond of intimacy.

As Thomas grew older—into his nineties—he moved from the place I knew as his home, an upper story few rooms on Four Farms Road, very rural and simple. He became a resident in an assisted living center which was nearby. When I came to visit, he was usually sitting outside the main entrance on a bench waiting for me. When I visited him a few months after he had had a stroke, I was surprised, although he had his arm in a sling, that he had not lost his familiar smile, open honest face, and warmth. On this visit, I wasn’t expecting to go out to lunch with him, yet he invited me to do so and directed me to a nearby place he had found.

Seated in a booth in the nearby restaurant we settled in for a conversation—but this time I took the lead because I wanted him to know what I had been doing as a result of being inspired by his thoughts and work. He knew I had taken on a difficult struggle to prevent the building of a sewer and consequent development of a large farm opposite the road on which I lived in order to have it designated as a nature park. Not only was he interested in this struggle, but he had made a trip from Greensboro to my town of Blacksburg, Virginia, to speak at a public center for this project of mine. And now I was eager to tell him the news that the long work to preserve the lands and wildlife had actually succeeded.

I could not help being excited to tell of this “victory,” to the person who had come into my life some ten years earlier. He was obviously pleased, and I knew that this was only the beginning for me—when

you feel deeply that you are on the right ship, you stay on it even if there would be a long haul ahead. In this case I would say the name of the ship would be saving those areas and members of the sacred community of Earth when possible. Also this ship involved adopting what Thomas calls “cosmological thinking” with awe, reverence, respect, life-connect-
edness, and identification with all.

Thomas foresaw that humans would be damaged as a species “unless humanity can move from its present fixations on controlling, changing, damaging, and destroying Earth’s sustainability through the habitats and processes of the planet.” It was during one of these last times with my guide, who had opened a new and lasting path for my life in my seventies, that he spoke of “the three basic rights that all humans share with other forms of life: The right to be. The right to a place to be (habitat). The right to be enrolled and respected in the great community of life and take their part in it with the unique capacities of their own species.”

And it is and was and will be, as long as I remain capable of work and thought, the path I revere. This is who I am and have become with great hope and belief that this path is becoming more and more understood and followed by others. May it be so.