

## CONCATENATIONS OF ALLUREMENT

By Maria Myers

*The future enters into us,  
in order to transform itself in us,  
long before it happens.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke



“Poisson Saturne Strange Attractor” by Bvsvydow, CC BY-SA 4,  
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The circumstances and consequences of my interactions with Thomas Berry are so improbable that I hesitate to confine them to words.

Recounting them to friends and colleagues—and now to readers unknown—is daunting. My attempt to do so here is not only in honor of the endearingly generous person we have been privileged to know and learn from, but also in service to that which he eloquently calls into shared awareness.

In retrospect, categories of thought about what seem to me like a series of *strange attractions* range from impossible to inevitable. They suggest the term “concatenation”—defined as “bringing two or more separately located things together” and referring to “singular events unlikely to recur”—to best describe a sequence of events that seem remarkably *unlikely to have occurred at all!*

I was first drawn into Thomas Berry’s orbit by an inadvertent act of eavesdropping when I happened to pass a small circle of strangers

chatting during a coffee break and overheard his name and a date when he would be speaking at a place not far from my home. The name was unknown to me then, and it seemed the message went in one ear and out the other, but it kept recurring in my memory until I finally called the site mentioned to request more information. I was told it was a private event, not open to outsiders, which should have been enough to put an end to my exploration, but the niggling message continued to persist, without a why.

When I telephoned again to ask if a single exception to the strict policy of exclusion might be considered, I was again firmly rebuffed. Equally firmly, I decided to forget it, but whatever was inviting my attention would not have it; the beckoning grew stronger, more insistent. When I became consciously aware that I was being *lured* toward something that would not take no for answer, I asked a friend who had connections within the host group to intervene on my behalf. Thanks to him, I received an informal okay to “slip in under the tent flap,” if not to enter officially through the front door of where (it still seems) I was being called to be.

It was 1980, half a lifetime ago, and long before easy access to internet research. When I first heard Father Thomas speak, I knew nothing of his background and did not even have a copy of the program disclosing his intended topic, so I entered the space entirely without expectations. It had not occurred to me to bring a notebook to record what he might say, but I vividly remember digging frantically into my purse for pen and paper soon after his opening remarks. Somewhere among my long-saved books and papers, I still have the envelope I found there, now covered with verbatim scribbling, as well as the two pale, blue-covered, self-printed essays that he gave me after a warm impromptu conversation following his formal presentation. In summary, my worldview was irreversibly altered that day; enduring gratitude ensues.

A few months later, while attending Villanova University’s annual Theology Institute for the first time, I happened to purchase a newly published copy of the proceedings of the previous year when, unknown to me, Thomas Berry had been one of six distinguished speakers there. I remember holding that bright orange volume in my hand the following autumn and deciding not to bring it as I was carefully packing “essentials only” to take to Chicago for a year at the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS) as Matthew Fox’s graduate assistant.

I also remember my astonishment when after reaching my destination I opened my suitcase and found it there! *Non sequitur*, or so it seemed then.

The next improbable connection occurred during small talk between strangers. Brian Swimme had just been recruited by Matthew Fox to join the ICCS faculty in place of someone whose untimely death had created a sudden opening. Brian had been on his way, with his pregnant wife, Denise, and their four-year-old son, to MIT to collaborate with others in his chosen profession, mathematics, but had opted instead to take the vacant position in Chicago. I have no idea why, a few minutes into my first conversation with him (another person I had never seen before and, at the time, knew nothing about), it would occur to me to say, "Have you ever heard of Thomas Berry?" But I clearly recall his immediate reply: "*Thomas Berry? Thomas Berry!!*" Far from the quiet voice I had barely overheard speaking his unfamiliar name a few months before, here was a response of ready recognition, emphatic enthusiasm. And, as we now know, a spark of generative potentiality leading to exceedingly unlikely results.

The stow-away volume containing Berry's presentation at Villanova was soon in Brian's hands, then in Matt's. Not long after that, negotiations were underway to bring Thomas to Chicago. His momentous visit with us, the ICCS class of 1982, was pivotal in the ensuing Berry-Swimme collaboration that has enriched so many lives, my own among them.

Following graduation, I was offered an entirely unanticipated place on Villanova's faculty and taught in the Religious Studies department for nearly a decade. Even more surprising, I was asked on a couple of occasions to serve as a moderator at the Theology Institutes, my original point of entry into a new, profoundly altered experience of vocation. I was also invited to be one of the first women on the board of Kirkridge, the place where I had first heard Thomas Berry's name spoken. During those years I occasionally drove the 90 miles from my home to the gatherings Thomas hosted at his residence in Riverdale, New York. And on one unforgettable occasion, he graciously accepted my invitation to come speak informally with my undergraduate students at Villanova, an invaluable gift that I hope they appreciated and may continue to bring to mind.

In light of the starting point, all of the above is acknowledged here as far stranger than fiction. If I had not lived it, I certainly could not believe it, much less recall and recount it here. The most remarkable aspect, it seems to me, is not any achievement or accomplishment of my own or others. It is the enduring sense of having been *visited by* and *invited into* “the future,” a realm possibly best described by Rilke above and maybe by Rupert Sheldrake and others elsewhere. There is something indescribably joyous and invigorating about that!

When asked in a recent interview “what new thoughts” had occurred to her in researching and writing *Thomas Berry: A Biography*, Mary Evelyn Tucker replied, “I was continually amazed at his persistence and continual growth. He had a penetrating intelligence and a *unique ability to synthesize material. . . . He was prescient in anticipating our challenges and helping us to develop the stamina to understand them and endure.*”

For me, these well-remembered qualities remain as alluring as they have ever been, now recognized as both legacy and invitation.