

Personal Reflections on My Journey of Teaching Thomas Berry

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Overview

How do you teach Thomas Berry's work? In this article I reflect on my own journey and explore what has and has not drawn undergraduate students to Berry's vision.

I first taught a class called "Consciousness and Symbol" at Princeton University in 1966. Since 1967 I have taught it at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as Anthropology 435. Each year approximately 60 students, mostly undergraduates, from a variety of majors, take the course. It took over 30 years of teaching this class before I discovered Thomas Berry's work and included an ecological viewpoint. Shortly after its publication in 1999, I added *The Great Work*¹ to the syllabus. I am frankly amazed and appalled that it took me so long to include an ecozoic and ecological perspective. I believe the lag mirrors the lag in society of understanding the ecological perspective. It is an on-going struggle—how to introduce people to and engage them with environmental ideas.

Background History—A reflection on my journey before Thomas Berry: 1944 to 2000

My father was in D-Day. While overseas he sent me a book from England about cave dwellers. It inspired me to set about making stone axes. This created an important connection for me to nature, although it was a connection through tool use. When my father came home from the war we moved to Georgia and he became an electrical engineer and contractor. I worked for him from the age of 13 to 19 and gained great knowledge and appreciation of the use of tools. At age 17 I went to college, majored in psychology—the experimental non-human lab variety—then broke out of the lab and

1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

went to graduate school in anthropology at Harvard in 1959.

During my first year at Harvard four fellow students (one of whom is present here at the colloquium, Bill Peck) and I joined a seminar by Talcott Parsons and Robert Bellah on the sociology of religion. A key focus of the seminar was meaning and symbols. This was very important to me. Perhaps more important, however, was a profound insight I gained—that the individual is grounded in social and cultural systems. Talcott Parsons's systems theory was so exciting to me that I harangued my fellow students Michael Ames, Nahum and Fran Waxman, and Tom Kirsch about Parsons as I drove us, non-stop, overnight, from Boston to Chicago, to a meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in March 1960. Later, as part of a grant that extended my education in Parson's theory, I studied a symbolic expression of working class thought, a Communist-related drama called *Ludruk*, in a slum in Surabaya, Indonesia. (Florence Peacock, my new wife, gave up a promising musical career to join me. She survived a mad dog bite and a volcanic eruption.)

My first teaching position was at Princeton University. It was 1965. With the linguist David Crabb I created a program which would become the Department of Anthropology. That year James Boon, a sophomore, took my introductory course in the fall, and in the spring took my first course on symbols. Sitting-in on the class were Amalie Rorty, a philosopher, and Florence Peacock. The premise of the class was that human consciousness is grounded in society. I anchored my teaching on the work of Emile Durkheim. When I moved to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1967, I continued to teach the course. Over the years it has evolved. I added readings by Carl Jung to provide a psychological perspective and Griselda Pollock for a feminist perspective. I had yet to discover Thomas Berry and his ecological perspective.

After Thomas Berry: 2000 to 2014

As I mentioned earlier, I still teach "Consciousness and Symbol" at UNC, Chapel Hill. Durkheim's perspective remains the focus of my class. I was introduced to Thomas Berry's *The Great Work* by Herman Greene of the Center for Ecozoic Societies. Berry's ecozoic

framework now provides a larger context, the context of nature, of which human society is a part: I nest Durkheim within Berry. The readings are enriched by lectures from the physicist Gerald Cecil on energy as well as Herman Greene on threats to the environment and the fallacy of science that separates subjective and objective realities, a reflection on Bruno Latour's work. Class exercises include Chi Gong led by Stephen Lambeth and Sinead Corrigan (also present at this Colloquium). Some students choose to extend their experience of the class by interning with Tim Toben at Pickards Mountain Eco-Institute or abroad with Nourish International. Several students participate with Herman Greene at the Center for Ecozoic Societies. It is satisfying to see how students are drawn to Berry's vision and mission and how they enact its message in the world.

What is missing, however, from this classroom approach to Berry is a sense of urgency. Students have burning questions: "What can I do?" "How do I move from Berry's vision and warning into action?" "Earth and all that dwell upon her are endangered. We need to act!" Another weakness of Berry is the abstract and idealistic perspective expressed in *The Great Work*. Where is the human experience grounded in the particularities of life—social, cultural, psychological, personal, and historical? Another important question I ask myself is "What actually grips these students?" One answer is life's journey, the journey that each student is on. This journey entails psychological and social questions of identity, of jobs and careers. This often eclipses the demands of ecology and the universe. Frankly, I am a long way from answering these questions in general, or in this course.

This spring, in response to students' questions, I formulated a perspective to begin integrating three levels of movement. I called it "Journey into Wholeness," borrowing a phrase from the Jungians. The three levels or aspects are 1) movement toward the Ecozoic, 2) Jungian individuation, i.e., movement toward balance or wholeness of the self, and 3) Grounded Globalism.² The first two are well known, the third is my own work and may need a brief explanation.

The point of Grounded Globalism is this: collectively we strive

2. James Peacock, *Grounded Globalism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

toward an ecozoic balance, individually we strive toward a psychological balance, and these journeys are related. The journey is global, part of a process that is global, but also local, grounded in the place where each of us lives. For the student at the moment it is in a town, a state, a region, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the US South, all part of a nation and world. So we work out of that place as a start. That place is not just an environmental place, but also a social, cultural, historical, psychological, as well as an ecological place. Berry himself grounded his ecozoic vision in a memory of a meadow he encountered as a child, a point noted by several speakers at this Berry symposium.³

As we situate ourselves in a place, the many locales of the students' lives, we encounter not only physical spaces but also social and cultural spaces. For example, oppositions and differences of ethnicity, gender, of regional identity. All are part of the global journey and of the students' identities. Working with identities or oppositions is part of the journey into wholeness. Techniques may include, as Berry himself suggests, dreams and other subjective expressions like creative writing or drawing. I sometimes advise students to get in touch with the free therapy offered by student health services on campus if they do such work. And a therapist I also recommend is one Berry suggests: Earth.

Earth transcends differences of gender, ethnicity, class, and global identities, hence it can help frame and put these differences into perspective. But the differences do need to be confronted as part of the journey. Berry's idealized images of dreams and the unconscious need long bridges to reach into the actual dreams of students, which are often focused on immediate social situations. A tragic example from the media of late: Mr. Rodger recently killed several fellow students in Santa Barbara, California, as well as himself. His motive: he was rejected by several women that he wished to date. His action highlights the social preoccupations of young students.

Here are examples of young people's perceptions after being introduced to Berry's work:

- My granddaughter Isabella is 6. She expressed great inter-

3. Thomas Berry, "The Meadow across the Creek," in *The Great Work*, 12-13.

est in and knowledge of the universe and nature starting at age 3. When I asked her what story she wanted me to tell, she replied “the universe, from the big bang to the final crunch.” When her nursery school taught “Thank you God for birds that sing, thank you God for everything,” she added, “Including bacteria.” Herman Greene gave me several of the children’s books expressing Thomas Berry’s story of the universe, and I read one to her. She interrupted me, “Abuelo, let me tell this story,” and she did, elaborating the birth of the universe by her own birth, tracing the sperm, the egg, etc. She has asked me to come to her school and tell her class a nonsense story that I made up about the “mean man who lives in a garbage can.”

- An African American woman in my Anthropology 435 class this spring met with me about a writing problem. She mentioned a recurrent dream about being bullied, so I advised her to go both to the writing clinic and the student health therapist. She did so and reported that both helped her greatly. She now volunteers as an intern with juvenile delinquents. Note her issue: bullying, not the environment. But by paying attention to her dreams she was led to her Great Work.
- A Chinese man, a sophomore, who lives in Utah, wished to participate in ecozoic work. He composed two songs, which he recorded with his band and which he played for our class. They have a nature and journey theme. He composed a very rich interpretation of the Ecozoic melding social, psychological, and cultural issues.
- My first student, James Boon, who was in the symbol course at Princeton in 1966, has become a leading scholar. I was recently asked to contribute an essay to a journal that is devoting an issue to his work. In that essay I suggest that Berry might enrich Boon’s vision. A key point of connection is Berry’s first of fourteen points: Earth is a communion of

subjects, not a collection of objects.⁴ Perhaps my critique will lead Boon's brilliant cultural analysis to include the wider experiences of existence including ecology.

- And from my own youth, I recall at age 11 or so reading a comic book. In it a hero and heroine were left on an Earth destroyed by catastrophe. The hero had to cross a bridge, hand over hand, because the roadbed was eradicated. No other humans existed in this barren Earth. A second image from my youth was a science fiction story about four or five boys in New Jersey who worked together in a garage making a space ship. The lonely, barren Earth from the first recollection was cheered up by the friendly group in the second. Later in life I lived with and studied Muhammadiyah, a Muslim organization in Indonesia, which now boasts some 30 million members. In a training camp there I experienced the camaraderie I had read about of the boys making the garage spaceship. Much later still, I experienced again a similar small group solidarity with a half dozen young people who worked together to create a program called "Global Carolina." Most of them are together still and the program continues to thrive.
- Recently, two charismatic young people, Elizabeth McCain and Hudson Vaughn, developed a neighborhood project that grew, in part, from a student taught honors seminar on civic issues and community involvement. As an advisor to the civic group I failed to draw Berry into their impressive self-taught course and project-launch. If they had grabbed hold of Berry, they would have made more of a difference.

4. Thomas Berry, "The Determining Features of the Ecozoic Era." Handout from the library of Santa Sabina Conference Center, San Rafael, California, 2004, except that Item 7 is from a similar list presented by Thomas Berry at an annual conference of the Center for Reflection on the Second Law held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Some versions of this document may have thirteen points. The version I work with has fourteen points, including item 7 referenced above.

The secret of teaching Thomas Berry and spreading his vision lies in deeply engaging with one's students. Our efforts to teach Berry will bear fruit to the extent that the young people catch fire and live the vision he expressed.