

THOMAS BERRY IN CINCINNATI, OHIO

By Jim Schenk

In 1978 Eileen (my wife) and I founded Imago. We were social workers and realized that so many people were not happy with who they were and what they were doing. We asked why. Our conclusion was there was a real dichotomy between the values of the culture which says, “if you have a lot of money and stuff you will be happy, and if you’re not happy you just don’t have enough money,” and reality, which says, “once we get the basic necessities of life, which doesn’t take much in this culture, it is our relationships that really bring us happiness.”

We started looking at our relationships with other people. We realized that while we are a tribal animal, this culture emphasized individualism, which separates people from each other. We began looking at the concept of community and simplicity as a way to bring people together.

Joyce Quinlan, a friend of many years, began working on a doctorate on future studies with a focus on the non-human world. Through her we became aware that we aren’t only disconnected from each other but from the rest of the Earth community of which we are a part.

After living with us for two years, Joyce moved to Chinook Learning Center on Whidbey Island in Washington State where she worked with Fritz and Vivienne Hull for two years. There she became aware of Thomas Berry and introduced us to him around 1980. She sent us a set of his blue books (the *Riverdale Papers*). (Sadly, these have disappeared over the years.)

Being newcomers to the ecological movement, Thomas’s blue books helped us deepen our awareness of our interconnection with the non-human world around us. This led us to invite many different people with an ecological orientation to come to Imago and speak. Fritz and Vivienne Hull, from the Chinook Learning Center, came to do workshops and presentations at Imago. Sunbear did several Medicine Wheel Gatherings. We began celebrating the Solstice, Equinox and Cross Quarters, along with full moon celebrations.

Through the people presenting at Imago, but especially through Thomas’s writings—the Blue Books and *The Dream of the Earth*—it struck us how fragile the Earth really is. The air, water, soil, ozone, and the list goes on of things we are totally dependent on. If just one of

them ceases to be able to support us, we cannot survive. Then there are nuclear bombs, viruses, chemicals that have the potential of eliminating our total species. In the late 1980s I remember feeling that our species had about a 20% chance of surviving for more than 50 to 100 years. In 1989 when *Time* magazine declared Earth as person of the year, I raised the odds to 21%. I am now back to 20%. With such a dire prediction, you may wonder how I continue. I love being human, I want there to be many more generations of our species. Therefore, it is worth focusing on the 20% and working toward our survival. But not just survival. I want to see our species thrive. We need to work to change the way we think as a culture. As Thomas and so many other people are aware, we need to reconnect with our amazing planet and see our role within it. It is well worth the effort.

Around the end of the 1980s, we made several attempts to bring Thomas to Cincinnati. However, he had no idea who we were, so he never accepted our invitation. I became aware that his nephew, Michael Berry, was the Executive Director of the Cincinnati Nature Center. I called Michael and asked him whether he would he consider inviting his uncle to come to Cincinnati to do a workshop co-sponsored by the Cincinnati Nature Center and Imago. Michael contacted him. I believe Thomas felt honored that his nephew valued what he was saying and doing and accepted his invitation. So, in 1990 Thomas came to Cincinnati to do a workshop for us. From this event, we helped many people deepen their Earth awareness, and helped Imago expand its relationship with people in the region.

Thomas's presentation at the Cincinnati Nature Center was the beginning of an ongoing relationship with him. In 1993 we invited Thomas, his brother Jim, and nephew Michael to do a joint workshop for us. We took this opportunity to begin expanding Imago's mission.

Imago began seeing the need to do the Great Work, not just talk about it. While we worked with children and adults on recycling, making homes more energy efficient, and spending more time in the woods around us, our sense of what we could do grew.

We took this opportunity to begin our work to affect Price Hill, the neighborhood of some 40,000 people where Imago and our home were located. We invited the three Berrys to meet with us to talk about our plan and get their feedback. With this weekend we began our mission of making Price Hill the greenest neighborhood in Cincinnati.

We worked for a number of years to create this. While we had some success in influencing a few people and were able to develop a video on Price Hill the Greenest Neighborhood, we were not successful in moving the broader community.

In 1997 Eileen wrote a grant to fund developing an ecovillage in Price Hill. This effort also did not succeed as we had planned. We did set up a Comprehensive Community Development organization in Price Hill, but the ecovillage did not succeed. We attempted it in an area that was too large and was the most depressed area in the community. Also we did not have a strong support system there.

In 1998 we began a series of EarthSpirit Rising Conferences. For the first one we brought in Dennis Banks, Rosemary Radford Ruether, David Orr, John Seed, Paula Gonzales, and Al Fritsch. We had 450 people attend this conference on the relationship between ecology and spirituality. Our second conference on “Ecology, Spirituality & the Great Work” was held in June 2001 at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky with over 1,100 participants. The keynote speakers were Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Miriam Therese McGillis, Matthew Fox, Paul Winter, Connie Barlow, Ruth Rosenhek, and John Seed. Our third conference in 2002 was held in Black Mountain in North Carolina and focused on the theme of Earth Elders. Thomas was one of the speakers at this event. He exemplified a true Earth Elder. As at most conferences, he was a major hit, giving a talk on Earth Eldering and a session reading his poetry, and being totally available to participants.

It was here that I was also able to interview Thomas for the anthology I edited called, *What Does God Look Like in an Expanding Universe?* (If you are interested in reading his interview or perusing the book, you may go to the website <https://communityearthalliance.org/literature/> and find it as an eBook. Hard copies are also available.)

In 2004 we started Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage in the neighborhood where we lived. We realized Enright Ridge wasn't too big, it wasn't economically depressed, and we had a strong support group through people who had moved to the neighborhood to be close to Imago. It is a retrofit ecovillage, meaning we are in an existing neighborhood, with existing houses and residents. We didn't start on virgin land and build with virgin materials. We did this with the belief that we need to change our cities to become much more ecological. We cannot spread out with new ecovillages everywhere destroying habitat for other animals and de-

stroying farmland; we need to stay in our cities, use existing buildings, and have them become centered on living sustainably. (I will soon have another book coming out on our ecovillage and how to start an urban ecovillage.)

We had Thomas come and do a number of workshops in Cincinnati. They were all enlightening and inspiring. However, it was really his strong endorsement of the work we were doing that was most inspiring. He felt the work we were doing with Imago and with Enright Ridge Urban Ecovillage was part of the Great Work. It is this type of support that has kept us working even when things became difficult, which they do when working as community.

Imago, the ecovillage, and Community Earth Alliance are now hosting presentations on the Rights of Nature, which is becoming an international movement. We are having Mary Evelyn Tucker as a presenter to give us Thomas's perspective on this topic. Thomas was very clear about the rights of nature. The Earth in all its components are subjects not objects. We are also having Osprey Orielle Lake, Executive Director of WECAN's (Women's Earth and Climate Action Network International) as a speaker to talk about their involvement in the international Rights of Nature movement. From this our goal is to set up a group working to bring this concept to fruition here in the Ohio River Valley bioregion. One of our primary focuses will be on recognizing the rights of the Ohio River. It is the most polluted river in the United States. It has the right to be clean and unpolluted.

But most of all, this movement is one of the first international movements that is promoting a change in the way we humans view the Earth. It basically sees us as part of the Earth, not the owner of it or that Earth is here for our species. The fact that a number of countries have put the Rights of Nature in their constitutions is encouraging. In Ohio, the city of Toledo passed a Rights of Lake Erie resolution. This is a movement that I believe Thomas would heartily support.