

## Thomas Berry's Influence on a Thirty-Five Year Evolution from Story to Action

Jim Schenk

My wife, Eileen, and I are both professional social workers. In the mid-1970s, I was the director of an inner-city neighborhood center focused on serving low income people. One of the realities that struck us was it wasn't only the poor who were unhappy, but most of the people in our culture were unhappy. Doing some research, we concluded over three-fourths of the people in our culture are not happy. Here we are in the most consumptive culture in human history, and people aren't happy.

We started asking why? We felt if we could answer that question, we could also deal with the issue of poverty. Further research led us to the conclusion there is a huge dichotomy between our culture, which says we need lots of stuff and money to make us happy, and the real needs of humans, which, after the basic necessities of life, are our relationships with each other—caring for others and being cared about. In this culture a philosophy of individualism has overcome our basic need for community.

Our next phase was to begin looking at ways to get in touch with our real needs and wants as humans. In 1978 we began an organization called Imago, "to image." We attempted to set up a Catholic Worker House. Dorothy Day and Peter Morin, who started the Catholic Worker movement, emphasized hospitality, discussion, and farming. We also offered workshops on community and began an ongoing discussion around this concept.

At the same time a friend of ours, Joyce Quinlan, left a Catholic convent after some 39 years as and moved in with us. She began working on a doctorate at the Union Institute and University, referred to then as the "University without Walls." Her area of concentration was future studies. She ended up visiting Findhorn in Scotland, Pendle Hill in Philadelphia, and Chinook on Whidbey Island near Seattle, Washington. At the same time she brought home

Thomas Berry's Blue Books (*The Riverside Papers*). After devouring these and discussing Joyce's experiences in Findhorn, Pendle Hill, and Chinook, it dawned on us we aren't just disconnected from each other in this culture, but from Earth itself. Going into its second year, Imago moved away from a purely anthropocentric direction and began looking at how we would live if we held Earth and Its people as sacred.

Thomas Berry was the primary impetus that led us to seeing ourselves as Earthlings, to see Earth as subject, not object. His notion that the old story isn't working any longer, that we need a new story, was the idea we needed to move into focusing on a new story rather than working to stop the damage being done under the old story. During the 1980s, we began doing workshops on community, organic garden, passive solar greenhouses, and other practical ways of living more sustainably.

It was moved by reading Thomas Berry's analysis of our time, in which he stated, in admonition, "The time has come when we will listen or we will die," and, in judgment, "Our difficulty is that we have become autistic. We no longer listen to what the Earth, its landscape, its atmospheric phenomena and all its living forms, its mountains and valleys, the rain, the wind, and all the flora and fauna of the planet are telling us." I felt this didn't give our species a great deal of hope. We had cultural autism; these are the beliefs of a culture. We needed to change these cultural views. Thomas put it this way, "It is not easy for us to move beyond those basic points of reference that have guided our way of life in former times, for these have given us our human identity and directed our religious and cultural traditions over the past millennia. These traditions have determined our language, our intellectual insights, our spiritual ideals, our range of imagination, our emotional sensitivities."

I considered we were also in a culture in which the large majority of people live quite well materially. With all of this, how could we convince ourselves we are in real trouble? I believed the human species was in great danger of extinction and, for sure, is directed toward a major reduction in population and consumption. I concluded we didn't have a bright future and predicted our species had only a 20 percent chance of survival as a species for more than 50 to

100 years. While I am an optimist, I still hold this to be true. It is hard for me to see our overcoming this autism.

I truly hope I am completely wrong, that we can learn to listen to Earth and learn to live within *Its* parameters. I find being a human, being Earth conscious of itself, is such a blessing I hope many more humans get the chance to celebrate being part of it over the coming centuries. In this hope, I find the will to continue working to make this happen. There is still a chance.

In 1982 I had an experience I will never forget. My father died in June of that year. I had nine brothers and sisters at the time, and I did most of the organizing for the funeral. While my siblings and their families went out to our parents' farm, I decided to take a walk in the Hoosier National Forest, which was right alongside the cabins where we were staying. I walked into the woods and followed some trails, but eventually went off the trail. I ended up sitting under an oak tree. There I had an experience of connection to the tree and ecosystem around me I had never had before. I experienced for the first time that I remember the ability to communicate with the other-than-human world. It was amazing and life altering. It was a deep experience of being an Earthling, of being one with this planet.

As Thomas Berry said, "What is needed on our part is the capacity for listening to what the earth is telling us," and this was the most direct link I had ever experienced. Science tells me it's fantasy, but it seems otherwise to me. It was my "white lily" moment. As Thomas also said, "Intimacy with the planet in its wonder and beauty and the full depth of its meaning is what enables an integral human relationship with the planet to function."

I also had the experience that the rest of the planet, the animals, plants, rocks, etc., have no animosity toward humans. We are simply a part of Earth, and it is the way they experience us. In terms of Earth, we are not bad or evil, any more than the asteroid that hit the planet and destroyed the dinosaurs was evil. If we believe humans are evil, we believe Earth is evil. We are simply doing what Earthlings do, using the abilities we evolved into in the best way we know how, in order to survive.

While our way of living has worked, giving us over seven billion of our species on this planet, our cultural autism is keeping us from

seeing this way of living on the planet cannot continue or we are going to destroy our species. There is no evil in a species becoming extinct. Many more species have gone extinct than presently exist. If the human species and many other species go out of existence, it is not a bad thing for Earth. It is only bad if you are a human and want to see our species continue.

This is one area where I disagree somewhat with Thomas. Humans are not a blight on the Earth. We are Earth, doing what Earthlings do. We have a story that is outdated, and if we want to survive, we need a new story. Like any species, we have a drive for survival. If we have the time, we will develop a story that will help us survive.

While Imago did a good number of its own workshops and presentations during the 1980s and into the 1990s, it also brought nationally known ecologists to Cincinnati as a way to help us better understand our relationship to Earth. Among them were Fritz and Vivienne Hull, Michael Dowd, Dorothy McLean, Sun Bear, Dennis Banks, and Charlene Spretnak.

I contacted Thomas a number of times through the 1980s about coming to Cincinnati to no avail. He did not know Imago, so I wasn't surprised. However, toward the end of the decade I became aware his nephew, Jim Berry, was the director of the Cincinnati Nature Center. I contacted him and told him I really wanted Thomas to come to Cincinnati and asked if he would invite him. He did, and I believe Thomas was honored to have his nephew want him to come. Imago and the Cincinnati Nature Center co-sponsored a conference with Thomas in 1989. It was the beginning of an ongoing relationship with him.

Thomas emphasized the need for a new story, but he also emphasized the need to walk the talk. From this we decided we needed to be involved in actually creating this new story. Our assessment was that much energy was being put into trying to stop the disintegration of the planet, but not a lot in creating a new story that tells us how we might live in harmony with Earth.

In 1993 we had Thomas return with his brother Jim to do another workshop for us. We invited them to a breakfast to meet with a dozen people about our idea for creating Price Hill as an ecological neighborhood. This meeting thrust us into a new action phase. We

created a video about our efforts. While we did many things toward this goal, it became evident we had bitten off a larger land area than we could really affect. In 1997 we had the opportunity to apply for a grant of \$100,000 per year for five years toward rejuvenating our neighborhood. We applied with a focus on creating an eco-village in a particular area of Price Hill. We received the grant to do this. While we ended up creating a strong comprehensive community development organization in Price Hill called Price Hill Will, the eco-village never happened. It failed because, again, we had chosen too large an area. It was the most depressed area in Price Hill, and we didn't have a support system in this community for creating an eco-village.

While working on this project, we also held, in summer 1998, our first EarthSpirit Rising Conference, which concerned how to integrate spirituality and ecology. At this conference we had as keynote speakers Dennis Banks, David Abram, Sr. Paula Gonzalez, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and David Orr. We have held seven EarthSpirit Rising Conferences since that date. In 2005 we held the conference around the concept of Earth Elders. Our theme was "How can we, as Earth Elders, use our wisdom to help reconnect our cultures with Earth?" Thomas presented at this conference. He was especially effective speaking from his own experiences as an Earth Elder. Meeting him there gave me the opportunity to interview him for the book I edited, *What Does God Look Like in an Expanding Universe?*<sup>1</sup> which was published in 2006.

Two years before this, in early 2004, we split off Price Hill Will. Though we had developed the organization, we found they were not as ecologically oriented as we were. Following this separation, while lying in bed one morning, it dawned on me Enright Avenue where I lived is not too big, it isn't depressed, and we have a support system in the community. Why not have an eco-village here?

Considering this, we asked many questions: "How do we change our existing paradigm?" How do we turn from a culture that holds economics as primary, humans as simply producers and consumers, and Earth as simply a resource. This is a culture that has been successful, that has been a big part in bringing about a population

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1. Jim Schenk, ed. (Cincinnati, OH: ImagoEarth Publishing, 2006).

of over (at that time) six billion people, but is now literally going to destroy Earth's ability to sustain us. This is a culture where the majority of people have lived extremely well for decades and still does. How do we convince them things aren't right?

Banking on the majority of people not being happy, is there a way we can model a different way of living that might enhance their sense of happiness? And can we do it in the city? Can we do it in an existing neighborhood?

It made a lot of sense to start in our own neighborhood with people we knew and cared about. So we invited 29 people to join us for a meeting to look at developing an eco-village on Enright Avenue. Seventeen of them showed up: Diana, pharmacist; Dennis, chef; Sharon, psychiatric nurse; Jerry, contractor; Jeanne, nurse; Michael, graphic designer; Kim, social worker; Kathy, homemaker; Jim, librarian; Eileen, educator; Blanche, retired; Joyce, futurist; Julia, farmer; Vince, food services; Carla, homemaker; Eileen, social worker; and myself.

We started out talking about the notion of an eco-village and then broke into three groups: deck group, kitchen group, and living room group. After answering the questions, "What does an eco-village mean to me?" and, second, "Does it make sense for Enright Avenue?" each group recorded the responses to the following question: "What would an Eco-village mean on Enright Avenue?" From this information, each person chose four areas they felt important and might be interested in working on. From these we set up five areas to begin and task groups to work on them. About each area, an early report stated:

Enright Ridge: Planters at top of street—They were installed, the flower selection is wonderful, and have held up extremely well.

Hiking Trail—The trail is open all around Enright Avenue. It goes through some beautiful areas, well worth the hike. Need some permissions from the neighbors whose backyards it goes through. Still needs some work, but a nice hike.

Community Meal—After discussion it was decided to have the first one on Sunday, September 26th if the Earth Center is available. Details will be worked out, and notices gotten around to residents on Enright Avenue.

Ways of including rest of residents on street—The street potluck is one way. A second suggestion was developing a street newsletter. Lydia Justice expressed interest in helping with this. For the first issue, e-mail materials to Jim Schenk.

Marketing Enright Ridge as a Eco-village—This has a potential of making Enright really special (this understanding is already floating around the city) which will improve home-ownership, property values, and bring people interested in in the eco-village idea onto the street. Develop a brochure. Jim S. had a rough draft as a demo. Michael offered to work on it. Add eco-village to flower pots. Use the newsletter as a way to introduce the concept to other residents on street. Also, there are opportunities to talk to groups in the city about this.

This was the beginning. It consisted of:

1. Declaring Enright Avenue an eco-village called “Enright Ridge Urban Eco-village,”
2. Setting up task groups to begin the process of developing the eco-village, and
3. Keeping communication open with all residents.

We next felt we needed to involve the rest of the neighborhood. We developed a concept called “treasure mapping.” We made a 4’X4’ box of plywood and put at the top of each side one of four topic areas: Families, Greening, Housing, and Marketing. We asked people in the neighborhood to respond to what they would like to see in the eco-village in terms of those topic areas.

The eco-village runs along a three fourths-mile long street. We divided the street into eight areas and had “ambassadors” for each area, whose job was to pass out fliers we developed about the event,

and, on the day of the event, to get people to come out. We put the box on the back of a truck along with two tables. We brought the truck to the area, unloaded the tables, put the box on one table and magazines, markers, scissors, tape, etc. on the other table. These were materials people could cut out and put on the box to express what they wanted to see happen in each of these four areas. At the end there was a collage of interests in each of the areas.

We gathered around the collaged box a few days later and assessed what people wanted. From this we developed a Housing Task Force, Communications Task Force, the Ecological Green Group (EGG), and Marketing. Underlying all of these was the idea Thomas Berry shared: "Developers see human needs and desires as primary; environmentalists see the earth community as primary. Developers expect nature to adapt to human activity; environmentalists ask humans to adapt to nature. Developers, in general, exhibit a low sensitivity to the concerns of the earth community; environmentalists are driven by a painfully high sensitivity to other beings." It was important to us that we approached all of these from an environmentalist position.

Housing in the eco-village is one of the most ecological aspects of being environmentally friendly. Instead of starting with virgin land and virgin forests to build our homes, we are living in an existing neighborhood. The houses are here. The housing committee has focused on purchased houses that are foreclosed on or otherwise would possibly be torn down, rehabbed them and sold them to homeowners, while keeping a few to rent.

The Ecological Green Group is focused on educating people in the eco-village on how to be ecologically oriented. They write articles for the newsletter and have bought a Pathfinder for people to use to assess sun availability for solar applications and gardening. It is also working to become National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Community.

The Communications Task Force has two focuses: One is to keep people informed in the eco-village about what is happening. It is a way to keep people not directly involved with the eco-village informed and comfortable that there is not an attempt to pull the wool over their eyes. This is done primarily by a monthly four-page



newsletter that is handed out by the ambassadors. The second focus is on the broader community. We feel this is a model for a way to rejuvenate our cities, make them more liveable, and help to preserve the planet. Since we believe humans need to stay clustered in order to preserve places for other species, we need models for making our cities sustainable. This committee keeps up the eco-village website, gives presentations about it, and welcomes new people who move here.

The Marketing Committee worked to advertise the houses available in the eco-village. The primary ways were by hosting a yearly house tour of the eco-village and offering monthly tours of the eco-village.

Over the years new people, including many young families, have moved to the eco-village. The Marketing Committee ceased, and the Communications Committee took over many of their tasks. And finally the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) began in 2009. It is a CSA using backyards and lots rather than a farm. It hires farmers and provides organic food grown in the city. It has written and published a book called, *Starting Your Urban CSA, A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a Community-Supported Agriculture Project in Your Urban Neighborhood*.<sup>2</sup>

We now have over a third of the residents involved in the eco-village, about a third open, and another third indifferent to the ecological aspect of the eco-village, but appreciative of the positive changes that have taken place. We have a neighborhood where almost everyone knows everyone else and enjoys being a part of it.

Thomas said, “We must now reinvent the human as a species within the community of life species.” Our goal with the eco-village is to reinvent ourselves, and to do it as a model for other neighborhoods. We are in a time of serious Earth changes. It is critical we quickly reinvent ourselves, and to do it in the urban setting. Enright Ridge Urban Eco-village is a demonstration of one possible way of doing this.

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2. Jim Schenk and Julie Hotchkiss, *Starting Your Urban CSA, A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a Community-Supported Agriculture Project in Your Urban Neighborhood* (Cincinnati, OH: Bold Face Press/Price Hill Historical Society, 2014).