

Reading a Life, Discovering a Master

By Kathleen Deignan, CND

It is a joy to be here during the 10th Anniversary of the passing on, passing deeper and wider, passing into us of our esteemed teacher, Father Thomas Berry.

Special thanks to President DeGioia, John Borelli and the organizers of this conference who offer us the chance to celebrate another “great work” of the extraordinary team Drs. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, now in collaboration with Andrew Agyal: the publication of the much-anticipated *Biography of Thomas Berry*.

I would not be on this stage were it not for the counsel and affection of Mary Evelyn Tucker who bid me stay in my first class with Thomas as I suffered the intellectual tension of incomprehension and mental bewilderment all those years ago at Fordham University. My first Berry course: “The Great Mother.”

Stay, Kathleen she said, *keep moving with him*. Moving and moving into greater realms of insight. *Stay*.

And so I did, and so I am here.

And now, at yet another station of achievement, I continue to wonder at the fruitfulness of the Tucker/Grim union whose beginnings I had the delight to witness four decades ago.

I continue to marvel at what their synergy has created for all of us and for everyone forever – anthologies of thought, worlds of thought, places and spaces for the development of thought within the great wisdom traditions of this world.

And I continue to be especially grateful for their curation of the legacy of Thomas, their intellectual mentor and spiritual father.

How their lives honor his, the body of their Great Work magnifying his own and insuring its perdurance and accessibility for generations to come who will no doubt have greater need of Thomas' wisdom and guidance even than we.

And so we thank them for *The Biography of Thomas Berry* which they and Andrew have given us.

It is a beautiful book, an important book, a necessary book.

The beauty of this book is more than what is conveyed in its comprehensive summary of the "good news" about Thomas.

The beauty of this book is that *it conveys Thomas*, his presence, his wisdom, his beloved gracious self.

This is a beautiful book because it mediates Berry's own beautiful voice speaking to us, perhaps for the first time, from the authority of *Goldenrod* – his unpublished, late-life memoir which sounds through this biography as autobiography, as "confessions," as his own authentic testament.

The Biography of Thomas Berry is also an important book because it gives us the richly layered historical context for the life of a great historian who sought through the arcs of unfolding eras a grand epic, a great unifying vision – a story of everything.

As we know, for Thomas it was "story" *all the way down*: – the cosmic venture, the human venture, the Earth venture, my venture and yours. *His* venture – his story. And now we have it. Thomas' Great Story.

But more than beautiful and important, this biography is necessary because now Berry can be more fully and personally encountered as the *man*, the person, the friend who possessed the mind that continues to quicken ours, the sensitive soul who left us words that casts the spell that awakens us.

This biography is important because it is an invitation to intimacy with the master who no longer stands before us and who, going forward, will be unmet by generations to come but for these touchstones.

Finally, this book is important to me because it is the next contribution to the birthing of the *Thomas Berry School of Ecozoic Wisdom*, an intellectual and spiritual schola maturing and developing alongside other great schools of thought within the great academic and cultural traditions of history.

More than a great mind, Berry was and remains a great wisdom master who followed in the steps of his own master Aquinas in his desire to offer a world in transition an illuminating synthesis, an integral vision, a compendium of salvific knowledge to guide the cosmotheandric enterprise toward a new horizon.

In this, Thomas was and remains for me the archetypal teacher the master and mentor, known briefly and then forever.

He was and remains my university, the continuation of my higher education, whose teaching I labor to pass on to my own students in hopes that they will pass it on to their students, their children, their worlds.

Lineages and legacies. Legacies and lineages.

The soul of “The Berry School.”

Perhaps like many of you, my gratitude to Thomas is deed: to create places and spaces where he can yet be met. To create places and spaces where he can do the one thing he always wanted to do: to teach.

And so, the week of his death, four of his students - Dr. Brian Brown, Danny Martin, Kevin Cawley, and Kathleen Deignan inaugurated a living memorial: “The Thomas Berry Forum for

Ecological Dialogue.” And now a decade on, a fuller iteration of the scope of Thomas’ challenge has been funded – “The Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona” - where Thomas’ vision is a pedagogical field unfolding in curricular integration and modalities, and where each project offers a living, learning opportunity in which to encounter The Teacher. Perhaps such innovative stations may become an evocation of Berry’s Riverdale Center for Religious Research in a new key, a new place. Perhaps, as these Ecozoic scholas multiply wherever Thomas’ influence has taken root , we will see the flourishing of the greater potential of his seminal work awaiting the likes of us for fuller realization.

It is my true wish to see the multiplication of such initiatives for Ecozoic studies in lineage with Thomas – and who but those of us here assembled are better positioned to insure the diversification of such endeavors? This is my wish and this is my challenge to all of us who have been blest by Berry’s enlightenment: carry it on.

And have we not been endowed with all we need for such a Great Work to corporately, virtually, or actually build the *Berry School of Ecozoic Wisdom* by our beloved friends and colleagues John and Mary Evelyn? In fact they have already created its global, multi-lingual, multi-media inscape and outreach in film, academic curricula, symposia, libraries of publications, scholastic mentoring, and a host of ongoing projects that permit Thomas to keep doing what he most dearly desired to do: to teach.

So one decade after his passing into his virtual School we find ourselves at one of its convocations gathered here, now, his students old and new.

This is what I celebrate on this 10th anniversary of Thomas’ augmentation, that we have become his School of thought and action, and my wish is that we consciously and committedly take up the mantle and the mandate to continue his teaching, offering the salvific vision – the real possibility of the Ecozoic - to generations not yet born, but anticipated by our labors: to foster by as a feature of our Great Work the Thomas Berry School of Ecozoic Wisdom.