WHY 2014 IS A SPECIAL YEAR IN RELATION TO THOMAS BERRY

The year 2014 has two special anniversaries related to Thomas Berry: June 1, 2014, will be the fifth anniversary of his death, and November 9, 2014, will be the 100th anniversary of his birth. CES is not focused on Thomas Berry, but we are focused on the Great Work, the work of moving on from a terminal Cenozoic era to an emerging Ecozoic era in the history of the planet Earth, identified by him.

We believe it is not Thomas Berry the man who is important but Thomas Berry’s work. We further believe that this would be his wish. He was a modest man and did not like to draw attention to himself. His passion was for the Earth. Nonetheless, his work cannot be separated completely from the man.

Now that five years has passed, an interval has passed when we can begin the reassessment of his work, the reappropriation of his work, and the expansion of his work. We believe, however, this should be an honest appraisal. Was Thomas a passing figure, inspirational for some for a time or is his work enduring? We would consider it enduring if it continues to provide guidance. Much has changed since the time he did his major writing and even since his death.

To this end we will be holding a Colloquium at the University of North Carolina on May 28-30, 2014, on “Thomas Berry’s Work: Development, Difference, Importance, Applications.” The purposes of the colloquium will be to

- Situate Berry’s work within broader intellectual and social currents and contexts
- Review his ideas critically
- Assess his contributions to particular domains and establish conversations between Berry’s work and other fields or thinkers
- Analyze the contemporary relevance and potential applications of his work
- Develop further his key concepts concerning the main elements of the transition(s).

A copy of the “Call for Papers and Participation” related to the Colloquium is available HERE.

Prior to the Colloquium we will publish an issue of The Ecozoic providing a critical commentary of Thomas Berry’s Work, and after the Colloquium we will host a celebratory weekend at Camp New Hope in Chapel Hill on Thomas’s work. In addition, we intend in the fall to publish an issue of The Ecozoic on “Thomas Berry’s Great Work Now.” Start preparing your articles!

It seems to us that the issue is not whether we affirm the Great Work, but how we do, and more importantly accomplish, the Great Work. It is, of course, not within the power of any one of us or all of us receiving this publication to bring into being the Ecozoic era, but we should have a sense of what we need to do to do our part in bringing it about. We see this not as something that will be accomplished in our lifetimes, but a work that will take several lifetimes and, even then, will be ongoing. We subscribe to David Orr’s admonition to turn from the short
run to the long run, but without excusing ourselves from taking actions now to preserve and protect Earth community.

In keeping with the idea of reassessing and reappropriating Thomas’s work, we offer in this issue two older summaries of Thomas’s work. This is a reminder of how Thomas spoke to people in the period of the 1990s and early 2000s, the time of his greatest public influence thus far. We are now, however, in a generational change. This must be passed on to a new generation if it is to live, and the message that the new generation takes will be different.

We caution people against spiritualizing Thomas, making Thomas an icon, equating his work with the universe story, and treating his ideas only as poetry and not as philosophical ideas. We commend attention to Thomas’s cultural critique and his ideas concerning ecozoic societies.

We celebrate and honor Thomas. In the grand scheme, however, it is not about Thomas the man, it is about his work and the guidance he gives for the work he gave to us and to future generations.

Please share your thoughts on this with us for future issues of CES Musings