FREE THOMAS BERRY!
By Herman Greene

I realize that the title of this article and the accompanying picture are provocative. Further, I understand they imply Thomas Berry has been restrained by someone or some group. I began this article under several other titles, but continued to come back to this one. I felt it contained a message that could not otherwise be conveyed. And thus I adopted it. I hope to make clear why I chose to do so.

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The date of the first publication of this article is July 14, 2014, Bastille Day. It is time to Free Thomas Berry.

I am concerned about convention and control in relation to Thomas Berry’s work. I believe his work would have greater influence if it were not so tightly bound by its past associations, including Thomas’s own intentions for his work. It does not belong to him anymore. It doesn’t even belong anymore to his wishes or his understandings. It doesn’t belong to the community of people who knew him when he was alive. His work is a body of work available to the world at large.

Being so, it may be interpreted by anyone, but no one can speak with the authority of Thomas as though he were still alive. Though his work no longer belongs to him, it is still the work that he produced. Those who have been influenced by him and his work have their own work, their own identity, and their own authority separate from him. Thomas and his work are a singular offering.

I believe Thomas’s work will endure for a long time and will speak for generations to come. What is for us now a guide to the Ecozoic will perhaps in time become the story of how it came to be, and a continuing reminder of how it needs to be sustained. This will only be the case, however, if the work becomes, each time it is heard, a fresh voice speaking to this time, this place, and this situation.

It is not necessary to know, for example, that Thomas was influenced by Teilhard de Chardin or any other source for Thomas’s work to speak. Similarly it is not necessary to know the history of contemporary science, such as that Edwin Hubble and Georges Lemaître discovered the redshift that gave evidence of an expanding universe. His work speaks for itself. What is important is that there be many interpretations and versions of Thomas’s work, not just one. People and peoples will hear in his work different things from their backgrounds to speak to their situations. For those who care about the work of Thomas Berry, this is for what we must hope.
Thomas’s work cannot and should not be dissociated from him, but it is not about him. His work speaks for itself even to those who have no knowledge of him.

Study of his work, his sources, his personal statements about his work and its meaning, his biography, and archival material about him will enrich the understanding of his work for many. Much of the significance of Thomas’s work, however, is not found in finding answers he gave, but in understanding and living with the questions he raised for us to answer. We cannot know, for example, what he meant by “ecology is not another course or program, it is the foundation of all courses, all programs, all professions because ecology is a functional cosmology.” This statement is suggestive, open-ended. It points in a direction. It is to be pondered and discussed. Its meaning will be determined by individuals and communities as they interpret and apply it.

Thomas offers the Great Work to his readers, but he doesn’t say how the Great Work is to be done. Some would advocate that Thomas does answer this and his answer is to tell the story of the universe (and reflect on and celebrate its meaning) based on the standard model of the universe in contemporary physics and the evolutionary history of Earth given in contemporary geology and biology. Thomas’s writing lends itself to this interpretation. He wrote, “The greatest single need for the survival of the Earth or of the human community in the twenty-first century is for an integral telling of the great story of the universe . . . a story known in the twenty-first century for the first time with scientific precision through empirical observation.” He also wrote, “What I have tried to provide [in my work] is a comprehensive understanding of contemporary scientific thinking about the universe as an integral evolutionary process.”

I don’t agree with Thomas’s own assessment of his work. Applied to his work as a whole, it is a gross mischaracterization of it. For me Thomas was primarily a human ecologist, a philosopher and a cultural historian. The universe story, with the meaning given above, is certainly part of his work as well as a recurring theme, but there are so many other aspects of it.

Late in his life, Thomas once asked me what I thought his greatest contribution was. I immediately answered, “The Great Work.” He said he thought it was “the universe.” If it was the universe, it was terra firma on which he placed us. His admonition was to know the universe, but to save Earth. I do not think he would disagree with Bruno Latour’s recent statement that in the Anthropocene, the new name for human is earthbound. He might disagree, but shouldn’t in my view, with Latour’s call to focus on that part of the universe story, he calls “geostory.”

If in Berry’s thought, the stars tell the story of the universe, even more so does every flower, each drop of rain, each animal, each sunset and dawn, and each life system. Every being declares the wonder not only of creation but of creativity. It is the dynamics of Earth and human interactions with those dynamics that are of paramount concern, not only in the Anthropocene, but in the Great Work that is intended to move us beyond the Anthropocene into the Ecozoic—a period of mutually enhancing relations among humans and the larger community of life.
Thomas adopted the scientific story of the universe, he didn’t add to the physical characterization of the evolutionary development of the universe. His broad adoption of the scientific story is to me a problem and his statement that we know the universe with scientific precision through empirical observation is clearly false.

Never in the history of science has there ever been such a divergence between theory and observation. The standard model of the universe includes ad hoc insertions of nonobservable, that is to say nonempirical, phenomenon such that 97% of the universe is now characterized as consisting of unknown energy and matter. That for which Thomas calls us to care and love, what we can know through experience, is reduced to an almost insignificant 3% of the putative total not counting the infinite number of alternative unknowable and nonobservable universes in the putative multiverse supported by some scientists in which every possible event is repeated an infinite number of times in every moment . . . and in the next moment as well. It occurs to me that the Ptolemaists never dreamed of such epicycles and ether was never so vast.

Further, if everything is now known with such precision, why is scientific research still expanding and why are new and sometimes contradictory agencies being discovered every day?

And of course, Earth itself is only a miniscule percentage of that 3% (of which 3%, 99% consist of plasma, which is relatively rare in Earth’s domain). Yet, we must start here. Fundamentally, we are earthbound. And, equally fundamentally, we are human—not just individual humans, but members of a collectivity of humans. And, equally fundamentally, we live in the Anthropocene, a time when humans as a collectivity have become the primary geological force shaping Earth.

If one begins with these three understandings:

- we are earthbound,
- we are members of a human collectivity (Thomas emphasized we need to re-invent ourselves “at the species level”), and
- we live in the Anthropocene,

then Berry’s writings take on meaning in a whole new way. Some of that meaning Berry understood himself, some goes beyond what he understood, and with some he might have disagreed.

What is important is to understand that Berry gave a living legacy, one that speaks freshly and anew beyond his own understanding in new situations. To have given a living legacy is the genius of great writers. To have given access to mysteries that exceed all understanding is the genius of the greatest of writers. The Buddhist would understand that out of this “nothingness” comes everything new, and when it ceases to be “nothingness” it only reproduces itself.
Berry’s writing is not “the Gospel” or “a summa.” Again to refer to Buddhist teaching, the finger that points to the moon is not the moon. It follows then that if we mistake the finger for the moon, we miss the moon. The moon is ever the mysterious beyond luring us into the new.

To say that there should be many interpretations of Thomas’s work does not mean that there will not be interpretations . . . obviously not. Nor does it mean that one should not give an interpretation . . . certainly not. Nor does it mean that one’s interpretation should not be critical of another interpretation. Ideas have influence only through free, open and ongoing discussion. Ideas that live are those that receive attention and are commented upon on an ongoing basis.

This has always been the case, but it is even more the case in today’s avalanche of information, ideas and discourse. In this day when ideas compete for attention, truth cannot be understood as something static and established, it must be continuously composed. Only ideas that continue to be evocative and receive novel interpretations live on and then in an always changing kaleidoscope of understanding.

I do not hope or expect the convention and control that exists in relation to Thomas Berry’s work to go away. Renewed efforts will be made to give authoritative interpretations of Thomas Berry, ways he should be understood. Awards will be made to those who, by implication, are the signal embodiments of Thomas Berry’s values—a perilous enterprise. Published texts have already been declared to be the definitive expressions of his ideas and new “definitive” texts will be published. No one will ever be able to penetrate the veil concerning what was Berry’s own role in the recently published expressions of his ideas. Rituals have and will be developed for groups of people who follow Thomas Berry.

All of these will carry Thomas’s work forward, and, when they become rigidities, they will also hinder Thomas’s work from going forward.

Thomas’s work is widely known and influential in a small group of people—people who live around the world, but it is little known in the world at large. That his work has spread so far is remarkable. Only the work of a very few people has had such influence. Yet his work should and could have greater influence.

I will join many times with those who have embraced Thomas’s work in conventional ways. I was nurtured by this community and in a sense re-born in that community. Members of this community are among my closest associates.

Yet I have also elected to step out of this community while still considering myself a part of it—the community of those devoted to the work of Thomas Berry. It is a small step, yet one those who have been a part of this community will recognize as being a large and risky one.

The step is to give free expression to one’s own ideas and interpretations of Thomas Berry’s work, extend it into new domains, relate it to works of others, and apply it in ways and in
situations where it has not previously been applied, all without seeking authorization from others, and with becoming vulnerable to potential critiques and suggested limitations of others.

I did not step out with anyone’s permission. To be honest though, it was not entirely my choice. To my surprise Thomas severely criticized me in his last years for giving a “process” interpretation to his work, and he demanded that I not represent that my work was based on his. Others, for various reasons, have also criticized my work and directions as being unhelpful if not destructive. The voluntary aspect of my stepping out was remaining true to my interpretations and accepting the status of being an outsider.

When I did step out, I did so with a sense of responsibility, not only for my work, but to the community around Thomas, to Thomas’s work, and to Thomas himself.

I invite and encourage others to take this step, not in order to cause a split within the Berry community, but to join in a new burst of creativity and engagement with Thomas’s work.

While somewhat inconsistent with my earlier statement that we need to move beyond Thomas’s own intentions for his work, I affirm this statement by him of his intent. He wrote: “My intent has been simply to present and to leave the reader to respond out of whatever background the reader might have.”

It is time. It is time to free Thomas Berry from the accretions of scientists, from being an icon, from having written sacred texts, from having unerring foresight and understanding, from being the message his texts convey, and from those who speak in his name and by his authority. Free Thomas from not being subject to criticism or questioning for fear his work will not stand up. Free Thomas from his work.

Let those who knew him and loved him, love his work, the Great Work, the work he did not know how to finish. May the love we felt for him be transferred to the work he held so dear. Relieve him of the burden of being a terminal thinker and let him be the vital seminal thinker he was.

“Seminal” (adjective)

1. Of, relating to, containing, or conveying semen or seed.
2. Of, relating to, or having the power to originate; creative.
3. Highly influential in an original way; constituting or providing a basis for further development.²

¹“Process philosophy” is the popular term used to identify the work of Alfred North Whitehead and his followers. Whitehead himself called his a “philosophy of organism,” a term I prefer.

²American Heritage Dictionary
The Great Work applies to everything. There is no single point of engagement, therefore no single perspective for engagement in it.

Thomas said:

*Beside the particular work we do and the particular lives we lead, we have a Great Work that everyone is involved in and no one is exempt from. That is the work of moving on from a terminal Cenozoic to an emerging Ecozoic Era in the story of the planet Earth . . . which is the Great Work.*

We must believe that there is no greater way to honor Thomas than to take his work seriously as being “highly influential in an original way and constituting or providing a basis for further development.”

If we do not do this, Thomas’s work will continue to be well known and influential in a small circle, but be little known and have little influence in the world at large.

It could be better known and have greater influence in the world at large and it should.

Free Thomas Berry. Now!