

## BOUNDLESS COMPASSION FOR CREATION

By Joyce Rupp

. . . *the universe is a communion of subjects  
rather than a collection of objects . . .*

—Thomas Berry

Precious memories of childhood activities on our Iowa farm fill my inner storehouse: running through dawn's dew-laden grasses, my hands in the black soil making mud pies in the grove, long hours of planting, weeding, and gathering produce in our vast garden, the chores of feeding oats to the chickens and tossing bundles of hay from the barn loft to the hungry cattle waiting below, summer evenings when I joined my seven siblings for hours of countless games before dark—a joyful time after the day's work was done—nighthawks swooping above our heads and owls hooting their first hellos. I did not need religious language to assure me that I lived among a sacred community. I trusted my kinship with nature and did not need words to express that sacred rapport.<sup>1</sup>

I took this natural relationship with creation for granted. So I felt quite a jolt when I attended a rural, Roman Catholic school and heard the warning, "It's pagan to see God in trees and flowers. God is in *us*, not in nature." To my teachers, being "pagan" implied a dire condition. With that threat, the communion established in my childhood was torn away from me.

Twenty years after that I slowly turned toward re-union with the natural world, reentering a bond with what resides below, within and above our beloved planet. I let myself fall in love again with creation. The writings of Joanna Macy, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Teilhard de Chardin, and Brian Swimme, along with poets like Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver, led me in this direction, but it was not until *The Dream of the Earth* brought me to Thomas Berry that I returned fully home to where I belong. Healing of the distortions of my childhood teachings arrived with his foundational emphasis on the I-Thou relationship with everyone and everything we encounter.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Berry restored my belief in having a horizontal, rather than a vertical, relationship with creation. His writings assured me that we are part of a whole, different from the other—not better than—not wielding power over another, but dependent on one another and benefitting from this mutuality. As my consciousness of the *I-Thou relationship* strengthened, I recognized the blatant separation that certain religious sources such as *Psalms* 8 imply: "You have given them (humankind) dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ps. 8:6* (New Revised Standard Version).

From the very first meeting with Thomas Berry's writing, I felt the compassion and inherent goodness with which he approached everything in the universe. (So radically different from *Psalm 8*.) He writes, "We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community."<sup>3</sup> He also speaks of our having lost "our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants."<sup>4</sup>

After reading *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* this respect became even more apparent. Author Carolyn Toben describes the reverence he extended to nature when she first met with him: "Thomas opened his eyes slowly and beheld the tiny plant in his hands, then whispered, 'You are so beautiful,' and a circuit of love seemed to pass between them that was palpable to witness."<sup>5</sup>

Besides this exquisite esteem for nature, Thomas Berry led me further into an awareness of the suffering inherent in creation. When I studied *The Great Work*, his keen perceptions increased my compassion for how our planet has been harmed and is in need of healing:

The deepest cause of the present devastation is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and the bestowal of all rights on the humans. The other-than-human modes of being are seen as having no rights. They have reality and value only through their use by the human.

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe.<sup>6</sup>

I longed to share this view with others and finally gained courage to submit a manuscript to Orbis Books. *The Cosmic Dance* was published in 2002. Its essays and poems reflect Thomas Berry's wisdom regarding our interdependence with the universe, the I-Thou relationship he urges us to have, and his understanding of the transformative process—the "primordial flaring forth,"—that gives way to newness. This book remains the most cherished of my publications

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<sup>3</sup> *The Great Work*, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn W. Toben, *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry*, (Whitsett, North Carolina: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012), 28.

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Work*, 4.

because each page invites the reader to recognize our kinship with everything. I could never have written what I did without the significant influence of Thomas Berry.

Twelve years ago, I discovered a more direct way to enable others to know and value his teachings. Early in 2007, Margaret Stratman, another member of my religious community, joined me in creating and establishing a four-day program titled *Boundless Compassion*, which focuses on learning how to live compassionately. When Margaret and I created the content and process, we both recognized the suffering of our planet and decided one component would definitely be that of compassion for creation.<sup>7</sup>

The program topics include: *Compassion as a Way of Life, Compassion for Self, Compassion and Suffering, Compassion and Marginalization, Compassion for Creation, and Becoming a Compassionate Presence*. When we encourage participants to reflect on compassion for our planet, we first consider the woundedness of Earth. Following this, we ask them to go outdoors and quietly be with the wonder of creation, much like Thomas Berry described for himself: “I was immersed in the mystery of things, in the mysterious powers expressed in natural phenomena. The various living beings I experienced as integral with my own existence.”<sup>8</sup>

We invite the participants to become one with whatever they choose, such as a leaf, bird, stone, or soil. They are to reflect on what it could be like for that part of creation to exist, to enter into the life of that particular subject as fully as possible, to imagine how it is to go through the seasons, and to experience the treatment they receive from humans. This I-Thou reflection with nature often develops into a profound experience for the participants and moves them beyond the old paradigm of dominance-separation. When they rejoin the large group we listen to them speak about what occurred in their time of bonding. Following that sharing, we discuss ways in which we can contribute to the healing of our suffering planet.

By June 2018, nearly 2,500 women and men had participated in the *Boundless Compassion* program. At that time we co-directors decided to offer workshops for any of those participants who wished to facilitate the program in their regions. We developed a detailed *Training Workbook* and we now have over 100 persons from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom who have become certified facilitators.

In conjunction with the training workshops, I gathered the essential content of the program into two books. *Boundless Compassion* contains the core content and the other has reflections and prayers associated with the six major topics. Each book is divided into six “Weeks,” with the

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<sup>7</sup> We initially presented the material in the structure of a four-day conference but soon realized that the content was such that sufficient silence and processing were needed for in-depth integration. We then changed from a conference style to a retreat format which has been highly successful.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xiii ( a quote from Berry’s unpublished memoir, *Goldenrod*).

fifth Week focusing on “Compassion for Creation.”<sup>9</sup> The title of this fifth Week reflects Thomas Berry’s work. “A Thousand Unbreakable Links,” suggests the interdependent kinship we have with all of life. In this chapter, I encourage readers to understand the foundational cause for humankind’s rash treatment of Earth:

“In *The Great Work* Thomas Berry laments the distance that has come between nature and humanity. Societal and cultural changes have led humans into a mode of thinking of creation as “a collection of objects rather than a communion of subjects . . . .” Because of the increasing distance separating us, we stand apart and lose an awareness of what is happening to creation. Consequently, the damage done to nature fails to affect our minds and hearts.”<sup>10</sup>

In the other book, *Prayers of Boundless Compassion*, the most obvious connection with his thought rests particularly in two reflections. “I Bow to You” expresses reverence for fifteen various aspects of nature. Example: “I bow to you, black soil, red earth, rocky ground, limestone and granite, ash and cinders, mud and clay, sandy beaches, loamy woodlands, graveled paths, and silted streams.”<sup>11</sup> Another piece in *Prayers of Boundless Compassion* exposes the pain that humans have caused in treating non-humans as objects. Here are a few lines from “What Have We Done to Them?”

Shoot them. Swat them.  
Stomp on them. Kill them.  
Steal their food. Beat them.  
Rip the hide from their bodies.  
Get them out of the way.  
Cage them. Slaughter them.  
Poison them. Drown them.  
Hook them. Snare them.  
Cut off their paws. Skin their fur.  
Squash them. Behead them.<sup>12</sup>

I often receive messages from those who have led study groups with the *Boundless Compassion* book. They tell me, as do the participants in the four-day program, that their lives have been

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<sup>9</sup> Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018) This book is structured as a study book with topics matching the six components of what we teach.

Joyce Rupp, *Prayers of Boundless Compassion* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> *Boundless Compassion*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> *Prayers of Boundless Compassion*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

changed because of what they learned and experienced. Their personal transformation includes an understanding of compassion for creation. I hope that each person goes forth from our *Boundless Compassion* program with more inspiration and a greater determination to live as a compassionate presence, one that includes a profound gratitude and respect for all that exists.

Thus it is that I continue to be deeply grateful for the influence of Thomas Berry on both my personal and professional life. Each day as I walk around the three miles of Blue Heron Lake, I pause to thank the trees for their abiding presence, the soil and stones on the path for grounding my feet, the air for precious oxygen filling my lungs and nourishing my bloodstream, and the many creatures both seen and unseen, heard and unheard, who accompany me on my trek. I doubt I could ever have reached this kind of awareness and gratitude without the immense and wise work of the person I have come to know and reverence as Thomas Berry.

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