

Thomas Berry: Life, Work, and Legacy

by Kathleen O'Gorman, Ed.D.

Thomas Berry is important for his prophetic, inclusive, dynamic vision of where we are in the evolutionary process, how we came to be where we are, and where and how we need to move forward toward a viable future.

Indeed, the man himself and his vision embraced cosmic proportions, possibilities, and responsibilities! And yet, he always remained immediate and local in his concern, modest and understated, always deflecting attention away from his person and toward the appreciation, urgency, and reverence of Creation and its defense against human exploitation and degradation.

Thomas was a modest man, unassuming, unpretentious, gracious. To meet him one would never know his renowned status or reputation. He lived simply and seemed most at home with folks who did the same.

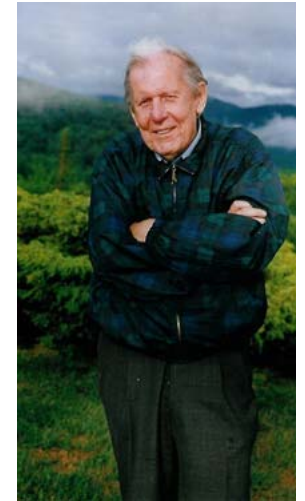
Honoring the Personal and the Public Domains

Thomas was wont to point out that each of us have many selves—our individual self, our family self, our community self, our earth self, our universe self (indeed, Thomas offers a most inclusive vision of ourselves, and our Creator!). He distinguished between our personal, private lives and our public commitments and service to the whole body. He used the term “great self” to refer to this larger arc of influence and accomplishment. He would often illustrate this saying that George Washington is not remembered because he was a good family man, or because he

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was married to Martha, or told the truth, or even that he was intellectually astute and well-educated. He is remembered for his “great self”—that self that made such a profound contribution to the life of a nation!

Well, Thomas Berry is not remembered today because he was a kind, gracious, and charismatic man; he is not remembered because he served as a kind of patriarch in his family—the third of 13 children; because he was a Passionist priest, an intellectual, or an engaged, active citizen of Greensboro, North Carolina, or upstate New York where he founded the Riverdale Center for Religious Research. Indeed, it is his Great Self that illumines the significance of these “smaller” selves. He is honored because he has offered something unique, relevant (really urgent), compelling and meaningful to our view of the world, of ourselves and our vocation as humans, and our God. And he gave himself to that end in actualizing a vision that will carry us into the future.



Geologist Thomas Berry

Thomas, the Wisdom Needed in Our Time

This great visionary did not reconfigure past interpretations of faith and life and hope; rather, he offers us a new and comprehensive synthesis much like Thomas Aquinas did in the Middle Ages and Teilhard did in the mid 20th century. In this, we discover Thomas Berry’s “great self” and his “great work.”

The Great Work is Thomas Berry’s designation for achieving a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship, for the realization

of God’s dream for Creation. He taught that all human institutions, commitments, and activities need to work together for the good of the whole, for the life community and its ongoing, unfolding development.

We at LIM had the privilege of both a personal relationship with the man and a firsthand experience of his great legacy. Thomas received an honorary degree from Loyola in May 1994. A group of interdisciplinary faculty from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities nominated him for this prestigious award which was approved enthusiastically by the administration. Upon receiving the award, Thomas addressed the commencement assembly with this unforgettable response, “I would like to thank Loyola, for being the first Jesuit university to bestow such an honor on one whose primary commitment is the Natural World!” Here we witness Thomas Berry’s “great self” bearing witness to what he identified as the “great work of our times.”

We are indebted to
Thomas for his inspiring
presence and influence.

LIM invited Thomas back the next year to give a lecture series followed by workshops on what Thomas identified as the 4 influential institutions directing human affairs: the church, the university, the government, and the commercial establishment and how they must transform themselves to save planet Earth and thus faithfully fulfill their roles as faithful stewards of God’s creation.

Thomas returned to offer a spring lecture and workshop for 10 years, all of which has been caught on audio and video. During this time, he guided the development of the Religion and Ecology focus area in the Loyola Institute for Ministry’s Master’s Degree in Pastoral Studies, shaping the structure of the program, and proposing the two courses that now constitute the curriculum: The Universe as Divine Manifestation (a course which explores the revelatory nature of Creation in its sacred dimension— Creation as sacred text) and The Emergent Universe: Our Sacred Story (a course which explores the evolutionary process as the sacred unfolding of God’s plan for Creation—Creation as Sacred History). LIM is unique in offering this program integrating Catholic theology and the wisdom of science. We are indebted to Thomas for his inspiring presence and influence.

Thomas, an Inclusive Model of Spiritual Direction

Thomas’ vision and influence permeates the LIM program—its perspective is integrated across the curriculum. It has distinguished and enriched our program, and we are forever grateful. Hopefully, the gratitude will find expression in a renewed commitment to dedicating ourselves to the great work of our times—the realization of God’s plan for Creation.

May the spirit of Thomas Berry encourage us to embrace his vision, appropriate his wisdom, and give ourselves wholeheartedly to the great work of our time. This is what he would regard as the greatest tribute we could make in his honor. We carry on, Thomas!

Listen to Thomas Berry in his own words [GO»](#)