

2019-20 Chronicle 3 Climate Change Dreams and Visions

There is a quote in the Bible that I've always been attracted to.

“In my last days, the Lord declares, I shall pour out my Spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young people shall see visions, your old people dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17)

I don't make a habit of quibbling with the Bible but, as one of the old people—I'm a few weeks away from my 81st birthday—I want to point out that I have been blessed with both a vision and dreams. I'll tell you about them. I might also do a bit of prophesying.

I inherited my vision from a close friend and mentor, Thomas Berry. He was a Roman Catholic priest in the Passionist order and a cultural historian. He had a vision that became his mission in life.

His vision first came to him as boy of eleven growing up in Greensboro, North Carolina. He wandered into a meadow near his home. The meadow was filled with white lilies. He was overwhelmed by the beauty of what he saw. Here is what he said about this vision:

(The experience) became normative for me through the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances the meadow in the nature cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes the meadow or negates it is not good. My life thinking is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.”
(The Great Work, p.13)

I first met Thomas Berry when I was a young monk living in a Passionist monastery. But I didn't know him very well back then. He was seen as a radical who was marching to the tune of a different drummer.

After a decade or so I left the monastery and my life as a priest, married and raised a family. Eventually, after a number of years as a community organizer in American cities and northern Canadian resource towns, I took a job with the Government of the Northwest Territories as the Superintendent of Social Services for the Baffin Region in the Eastern Arctic.

When I asked my superiors in the western Arctic what my job was, they told me it was to “go out there”, work in those thirteen small settlements and “help those people develop”. (Translation—teach them to make their communities like white communities). It took me a couple of months to realize that I was working with a people who had been developing themselves for more than a thousand years in the harshest climate on Earth.

My first task was to develop a management context in the communities—Management by Objectives, Zero-based Budgeting, Performance Measurement or whatever. But my plan bombed because those contexts didn't work. I would fly into communities to get feedback on our services. But they weren't buying what I was selling. Instead I had competition. The elders would get up in community after community and they would repeat their mantra in their language, "Learn from the land." I respected this mantra but considered it a bit quaint and off-topic. I got discouraged and thought about throwing in the towel and finding another job somewhere else. Then it happened.

One discouraging day I was reading an article in one of Thomas Berry's books. He said, "*The universe is the only text without a context.*" Then came the next zinger... "*We are not a collection of objects. We are a community of living subjects.*" These words struck me. They were the vision I had been looking for-- buried beneath the layers of written rules, regulations and requirements of a Euro-Canadian culture.

After this revelation in the early 90s I started visiting Thomas Berry at his home in North Carolina. Once or twice each year I'd travel down from the Arctic and meet with him. Then, a little later, I joined up with two friends from our monastery days. We would spend a few days with him at his home or later in a home for seniors in Greensboro. It was all a wonderful learning experience.

One day I asked him about contexts. He looked at me, sighed a bit as if I hadn't been listening, and said, "Contexts are everything." In a word, we have to start thinking about the living Earth and the universe differently. Earth and the universe are not something outside of us. They are within us, part of us and we are part of them. And our human communities are part of the Earth community.

In those days Thomas had become quite famous and was continually asked to give talks around the U.S., in Canada and sometimes abroad. He would tell his audiences the Universe Story and explain the New Cosmology that traces our relationship with the living Earth and universe. At the end of his talk people would inevitably ask him what they should do. He would say, "*Tell them the story*", by which he meant the story about their relationship with Earth and the universe.

On one occasion a man got up during the question period and said, "*Father Berry you are a Roman Catholic priest but you have not said a single word about those who are sick, suffering and going through very difficult times. How can you justify this?*"

Thomas thought for a moment and then responded, "*When we are all together in a lifeboat and there are sick, suffering and injured people we must do all in our power to care for them. But we must also care for the lifeboat.*"

In a later visit I told him that I had friends in the Arctic who reflected on the beauties of nature to reinforce their regular meditations. I asked him if he had ever written anything

on an Earth-based spirituality. He told me he hadn't. I was surprised. After a moment he said, "*I have written something you might find interesting...on the spirituality of Earth.*" Translation—we are part of the living and sacred Earth. It is not "out there". It is "within us"—part of us. We must discover it.

Eventually, after twenty-six years in the Arctic, my wife and I moved south and settled in in the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island. For several more years I continued working on projects in the Arctic, travelling back and forth. Then I retired.

At first I got Involved In community environmental projects. More recently I have been spending my time sending out regular chronicles on Climate Change. The chronicles are based upon the bridge between the vision and insights of Thomas Berry and the teachings of the Indigenous Elders.

My vision, as we move into the future in a climate changing world is a belief that we will create a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth. My dream is that our young people, our sons and daughters and their sons and daughters and future generations will share this vision and work to create a different world. They seem to be trying to implement my vision and dream already.

Thomas Berry was very much of a father figure to me. He has helped me to find my way. He gave me my vision and dreams. He changed my life and I'm always deeply indebted to him for his guidance and friendship. I'm also indebted to the Inuit and Dene elders who have given me a new understanding of creating a different relationship with our Earth.

As I'm writing this article in my office, I have a picture of Thomas up on the wall above my desk. He is smiling down at me. When I look up at the picture I often remember our last meeting.

He was in his mid-90s, in ill health and sitting in a chair with a shawl around his shoulders. I bent over, gave him a hug to say goodbye and kissed him on the cheek. I straightened up, looked down at him and our eyes met. At that moment he smiled up at me and we both realized that this would be our last meeting.

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