

An Assisi of the Mind

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Rising steeply out of the endless miles of beautiful green and yellow pastures in the Umbrian valley of central Italy, about a hundred miles north of Rome, stands a stunning, tidal wave of mountain known as Monte Subasio. Perched on its northwestern foothill, sits the ancient town of Assisi. It was in this town, surrounded by fertile farmlands and olive orchards, where I first deeply encountered the hearts and minds of two extraordinary men of global significance: Giovanni di Pietro Bernardone, also known as Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) and Thomas Berry (1914-2009).

I was a 22-year-old college student in the summer of 1991, about the same age as Giovanni (aka "Francesco") when he was captured and imprisoned seven centuries earlier during a battle with the neighboring town of Perugia. I was also about the same age as Thomas when he entered a Catholic monastery in 1934 to begin his lifelong journey of intense learning, contemplation and reflection about the state of the modern world. As a Study Abroad for the Earth (S.A.F.E.) participant, I was part of a small group of college students and adult learners who were lucky enough to travel to Assisi to study with Berry, a man considered by many as one of the greatest cultural historians, religious scholars, and ecological thinkers of the 20th century.

The buildings of Assisi were constructed over many centuries out of the pinkish-white stones from the very mountain upon which they rest. These beautiful buildings stand in stark contrast against the sloping, green backdrop of the giant mountain behind them.

Assisi is a city of steep hills, narrow, zigzagging cobblestone streets and tight alleyways that climb up and down between buildings, connecting and reconnecting secret stairwells to ancient streets. Walking Assisi's maze of endless pathways and shortcuts in the summer is a workout that left us students short of breath and drenched in sweat. It was a playground of possibilities. In many ways, daily life may have changed little since the time of Saint Francis.

Around every twist and turn you find Italian homemakers sitting quietly in their second floor windows, sweeping their front stoops, or hanging their laundry out to dry.

Assisi in the summer bustles with locals and tourists alike and is filled with great, family-run businesses such as the Hotel Posta Panoramic where we stayed. The inn provided delicious home cooked Italian meals, breathtaking views of the verdant valley below – and no air conditioning. As North Carolina natives, the lush green meadows, woodlands and mountains and the summer heat of Umbria felt familiar to both Thomas and I and made us feel at right at home.

I first encountered Tom's work in 1987 when I was a senior in high school in my hometown of Chapel Hill. By chance, I randomly discovered Brian Swimme's book *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, based on Berry's work, at The Intimate Bookshop in Chapel Hill. Coincidentally, Thomas was born 73 years earlier in 1914 in Greensboro, just 50 miles down the road. Over the course of the next four years, between 1987 and 1991, I became a big fan of Berry and reasonably well versed in his work. I had also been lucky enough to meet Thomas and hear him speak a few times at a conference in Seattle in 1990 – so at the time I thought I understood his work. But this trip to Assisi in the summer of 1991 was to be the first of three consecutive summers I spent traveling to Assisi with my lifelong friend and collaborator, Drew Dellinger, to study with our future friend and mentor. The summer of 1993 was our last trip to Assisi and also included a very memorable week-long journey with Thomas to Ecuador to visit endangered rainforests and shamans in remote villages. This trip to Ecuador was also part of the S.A.F.E. program and was a fabulous experience in its own right. However, studying with Berry in Assisi that first summer initiated a deep personal transformation of my heart and my mind, as well as a transformation of my understanding of world history, the history of the universe, and human role in the universe. In retrospect, it is clear that when I entered my first class with Thomas in Assisi in 1991, I still had a lot to learn about the heart and mind of Thomas Berry.

Our classes were held in the *Sacro Convento*, a Franciscan friary that is part of the *Basilica of San Francesco di Assisi*. This massive building complex had been the spiritual center of the Franciscan order since it was completed in the year 1263. The basilica's location on the steep side of Mt. Subasio – part of the ancient, 870-mile Apennine mountain chain – served to make its dimension even more dramatic. At first site, one's mind absorbs the beauty of the exterior, with its whitewashed facade, ornate carvings and intricate stonework. Entering the interior of the Upper and Lower churches (the latter housing the tomb of Saint Francis) the vaulted ceilings, stained glass and colorful frescos, and dramatic architecture awakens a deep sense of wonder and reverence. Listening to Berry share his wisdom in this historic and sacred environment was exhilarating and awe-inspiring. "The human is both *a being in the universe* as well *a mode of being of the universe*," (Berry 1991) he would tell us, as we shivered with wonder, grasping – perhaps for the first time – the meaning of a deep spiritual truth conveyed in many of the world's religious and spiritual traditions. "Atman is Brahman" is a similar teaching in the Hindu tradition, for example. Berry was a renowned scholar of Asian religions, among many other things, and this was deeply evident in his thinking.

The Romans first constructed the 30-foot walls that encircle Assisi when they took control of central Italy in 295 BCE. The walls are a powerful reminder of the long history of brutality and violence that permeated the "invade and conquer" mentality of the medieval European culture that Saint Francis himself was born into. As a young man, Assisi's patron saint fell victim to the brutality of this culture prior to his well-documented moral and spiritual transformation in the early 13th century.

To understand the spiritual and cultural context of Assisi, one must understand the story of Saint Francis. In Assisi, this story could be found everywhere. It was told in books in the local gift shops, by the presence of the Franciscan friars in the main *piazzas*, the art in the churches, and the statues and memorials around the city. It was also in the bustling *Piazza del Comune*

where we spent most of our free time, hanging out with Thomas, our fellow students, and our other teachers, getting to know each other over a glass of wine, a *cappuccino* or a *gelato*. The fact that this exact spot, the heart of Assisi's social, cultural and political life, was the same ground on which Saint Francis once walked was not lost on me. Along with the teachings of Thomas Berry, and my immersion in the cultural life of Italy, the story of Saint Francis would become a core part of my studies during my first Assisi summer.

Legend tells us that in his youth Francis enjoyed a life of luxury, living his teenage years with reckless abandon, the benefit of having a successful and wealthy silk merchant father. It was a life filled with parties, music, and drinking – not too different from the life of many 20th century American kids, including myself.

In 1202, when he was 21 years of age, Francis was captured and imprisoned during a brutal battle with the neighboring town of Perugia. Like a few other wealthy young men from Assisi, Francis' life was spared because, rather than being left to die on the battlefield, he could be held for ransom. While in captivity he fell extremely ill and continued to be essentially bed-ridden for a year after his father's ransom allowed him to return home to Assisi. During this time, Saint Francis experienced a life-changing spiritual transformation, or what is sometimes called: "metanoia," meaning "a total change of heart and mind."

Much more than a clichéd religious conversion, this experience profoundly and permanently changed the way Francis chose to live in the world. As a result, he adopted a proactive and radical stance against the excessive greed, deep social stratification, and misguided pre-capitalist interests of the emerging dominant culture, including distancing himself from the business practices and material excesses of his own father. These newly awakened spiritual and political beliefs came at a great personal sacrifice, resulting in the loss of childhood friendships and tragically, even his own family.

Francis was known to frequently give away his father's money and expensive merchandise to those less fortunate. Instead of throwing parties with his old friends, Francis drew his inspiration from the life of Jesus and began caring for the lepers who lived in the valley below Assisi. This behavior was a source of constant embarrassment and frustration for his father, Pietro, who in 1206 demanded that Assisi's bishop convene a public trial about the behavior of his son which he thought was misguided and out of line. At the trial, Francis surprised everyone by denouncing his father, and his inheritance, and renouncing all worldly goods. History tells of the young Francis dramatically stripping off his clothes in front of a crowd of commoners, placing them neatly at the feet of his father, and announcing that from that day forward he would no longer call him "father". Vowing to live only as a child of "Our Father, who Art in Heaven", (ETWN 2014) he declared his wholehearted commitment to the way of God and justice, rather than materialism, greed and exploitation.

Publicly scorned, Francis chose to live as a wandering beggar and mystic. A vision to rebuild the dilapidated church of San Damiano, just outside of the fortified walls of Assisi, was made a reality by begging for building stones in the streets, recruiting masons and working alongside them. This act, among others, began to inspire local disciples who donned Francis' woolen sackcloth and joined a growing fraternal order who adopted the Franciscan vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Greatly influenced by the story of Jesus, these early Franciscans chose to live in solidarity with the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized. This was not merely a spiritual calling, but a radical moral and even political stance. Rejecting the culture of the emerging market economy and materialism that his family had become accustomed to, Francis turned his compassionate heart toward loving the poor and downtrodden, the animals and the natural world. He was said to worship and celebrate God – the divine – in nature and through nature. Francis' universal, even cosmological, perspective is deeply evident in his writings and teachings.

Remarkably in 1210, this scrappy band of Franciscan acolytes sought and received Pope Innocent III's blessing to continue promoting their emerging Order of Friar Minors. After this papal endorsement, knowledge of Francis grew rapidly in the Italian world and he amassed followers and influence until his death and canonization in 1226, and beyond. Over centuries, Francis of Assisi became one of history's most venerated religious figures, crossing boundaries of denomination, faith and tradition and demonstrating receptiveness to the message of divine immanence in global mainstream culture.

For Francis, *all things were connected; all things were sacred*. He developed a unique sensitivity towards the natural world and for his fellow human beings. Francis saw what Berry understood almost eight centuries later, that the "universe is the primary revelation of the divine." (Berry 1991) He poetically expressed reverence and praise for "Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire and Sister Mother Earth" as sustaining life forces in his work "The Canticle of the Sun", also known as "The Canticle for the Creatures." (Custodia Terrae Sanctae 2011) This special awareness would, centuries later, be identified by Berry as the gift of "sympathetic presence" (Berry 2006): a blueprint of sorts for creating a just and sustainable world.

Carl Sagan and a group of twenty-two of the world's most prominent scientists famously endorsed the very same concept in 1990 in Moscow at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival. Prophetically, Sagan and his colleagues "listed the dangers of global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, the extinction of plant and animal species, the destruction of rain forests, and the threat of nuclear war" (Steinfelds 1990) as the most pressing issues of the twentieth century. Their warning also came with an important prescription for a deeper, cosmological awareness.

"As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence for the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and

respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred.” (Suzuki and Knudtson 1992, 227) The scientists went even further, “Problems of such magnitude and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension.” (Steinfels 1990)

Berry himself could have easily made these statements, and his cosmological focus provides the broadest possible perspective to address these important ecological issues. “What I am proposing,” says Berry, “is a deep change in mind – a meta-religious orientation with three conditions: 1) The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects; 2) the Earth exists and can survive only in its integral functioning. We cannot save the Earth in fragments; and, 3) the Earth is a onetime endowment.” (Berry 1991) The concept that a “deep change in mind” is required to sustain a “mutually enhancing, human-earth relationship”, (Berry 1991) formed the core of Berry’s teaching that summer.

My front row seat to the great mind and generous spirit of this extraordinary teacher was also infused with the constant presence, character and beauty of the town of Assisi and the richness of the surrounding countryside. My daily intellectual journeys with Tom would begin by waking up early each morning, sometimes leaning out my hotel window that faced out upon the beautiful, green Umbrian valley below, and catching the sunrise over Assisi (or sometimes even the waning morning moon over the valley). I remember being awestruck watching the morning swallows engaged in their daily, diving and soaring ritual, moved by the possibility that Saint Francis himself might have had the very same experience.

Over breakfast before our first of class, I asked if Tom if he was familiar with a well-known writer in the field of Transpersonal Psychology, Ken Wilber, whose work I had studied at Prescott College. He said yes, but surprised me by not showing more interest in the topic. Sensing this, he said, “My work is not psychological or sociological, it’s cosmological and

ecological,” adding, “You see, Steve, ecology is a functional cosmology and this is the basis of all of my work!” (Berry 1991) Berry always brought the conversation back to the comprehensive story of the universe – to cosmology – while stressing the critical importance of a deeper understanding of the power of story in our efforts to establish ecological balance and sustainability on our planet – “a mutually enhancing, human-earth relationship.” (Berry 1991)

As Tom introduced himself to the class for the first time, and he often did this when meeting with new groups, he mentioned, with a shy grin on his face, that he was a not a theologian exactly, he was a "geologist – a theologian of the Earth.” It was clear that he was making a joke and a serious point at the same time. Tom had great charm and a youthful sweetness, even though he was three-quarters of a century old. Although polite and respectful, Berry was by no means a passive intellectual. Engaged and passionate, he spoke in a soft, quivering and slightly strained voice. Yet this voice always had precision and clarity, conveying Berry’s powerful message about a world that, disconnected from a cosmological dimension, had lost its sense of direction, and more specifically, its sense of meaning, purpose and value.

During our classes, this frail but energetic 76-year old explored all aspects of not only human history, but the history of the earth and the universe itself from every angle imaginable. From Greek philosophy, to indigenous wisdom, from classical religious traditions to modern science, Berry danced back and forth, effortlessly. His daily musings frequently ventured deep into prehistoric time, before human eyesight, even before the existence of our solar system. He brought the class in contact with intimate moments of cosmic unfolding, moments of “cosmogogenesis,” as he described in detail the birth of stars, galaxies and planets over millennia. In fact, nearly every talk included a sweeping presentation of cosmic history in its broadest, most profound sense. This perspective was drawn from the breadth of his understanding as a cultural historian, philosopher, religious scholar and practitioner – and importantly, from his personal experience.

As a child Berry began to recognize “the beginnings of biocide and geocide” (Berry 1991, 144) inherent in the emerging industrial process. In his book *The Great Work*, Thomas describes his own transformational experience as an 11-year-old boy,

It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene. The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky...this early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as education and religion. (Berry 1999, 12-13)

Thomas grew up knowing the modern world was not working. His frustrations mounted over time as he realized that our cultural, political and religious institutions, including his own Catholic tradition, were “assuming no responsibility for the state of the earth or the fate of the earth.” (Berry 1991, 143) In the tradition of St. Francis, Tom dedicated his life to cultivating in others a sense of the sacred, traveling and teaching as many people as possible in order to shift our collective consciousness towards a consciousness of sympathetic presence. For Tom, this was nothing less than a battle for the minds and hearts of the human community in order to save the planet from further desolation. “We are a pathological generation. We have become autistic, psychologically locked into ourselves, with no feeling towards the natural world, no rapport with the larger universe.” (Berry 1993)

“Though we cannot make a blade of grass,” Tom would say, “there will not be a blade of grass if we do not accept it, protect it and foster it.” (Berry 1991) Obviously, the same holds true for the delicate ecosystems of planet Earth as well.

For Thomas, cosmology told and taught as a story was a way deep into the hearts and minds of humans because story is “our primary mode of understanding” (Berry 1991) and in his

estimation “no community can exist without a unifying story.” (Berry 1988, 130) By delivering a sense of meaning, and purpose and value, cosmology has the ability to affect real and lasting change in our world. In fact, for Berry, the universe, and by default the human, could only adequately be understood within the context of a cosmological story. “All things find their place within the context of the universe, which forms one integral, sacred whole.” (Berry 1991)

I was attracted to this cosmological dimension of Berry’s work from the moment I first discovered Swimme’s book *The Universe Is A Green Dragon* (Swimme 1985), in 1987. Then, a few years later in 1990, when I was a student at Prescott College, I discovered Berry’s book *The Dream of the Earth* (Berry 1988) and was deeply moved and inspired by his thoughts and perspectives. I was captivated in particular by his articulation of the “discovery of a new origin story.” He conveyed that the discovery of an evolving universe was the “supreme historical event of recent times” with a revolutionary sense that this new-found awareness should act as a guide for “every phase of human activity.” (Berry 1988, 111) Berry’s powerful and precise language and his comprehensive perspective resonated deeply with what I knew to be true about the world.

As we students sat with him in the *Sacro Convento* in the summer of 1991, immersed in his mesmerizing style of teaching, I felt it in my bones. Like a skilled jazz musician, Thomas would often deliver his ideas in elaborate, multi-part sentences, riffing off concepts he had spent a lifetime crafting. He would say, “The historical mission of our time, is to reinvent the human, at a species level, in a time-developmental context, with critical reflection within the community of life systems of planet Earth, by means of story, and shared dream experience.” (Berry 1991)

In fact, as Tom would recite these complex sentences he would often lose his place, going off on fascinating tangents for long stretches and then needing to start over again. My friend Drew and I would joke that we should make him huge cue cards, but that was definitely not Berry’s style. No slides, no visual aids, it was simple and very straightforward: just him sitting or standing in front of us, thoroughly enjoying teaching and sharing.

To understand Berry's inordinate grasp of the breadth of ancient and modern history, of science and religion, one must look to Berry's own extraordinary history as a scholar. In the decade Berry spent as a Catholic monk between 1934 and 1943, alongside daily prayer and vespers, he studied nine hours each day, immersing himself in world history, including the histories of cultures, religion, philosophy and science. He was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1942 and left the monastery in 1943 to pursue his doctorate in history from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Over the course of the next two decades, from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, this Catholic priest and cultural historian mastered Italian for the purpose of writing his doctoral dissertation on the work of Italian philosopher and historian, Giambattista Vico. He later learned the ancient language of Sanskrit, and the pictorial language of Chinese, exclusively to study the sacred texts of Asia in their original languages. As a testament to Berry's commitment and genius, he mastered multiple other languages to mine their hidden truths and sought to apply this wisdom to the most pressing issues of our times: the survival of the ecosystems of planet Earth and the well-being of the human community.

With this academic and intellectual pedigree, it is not surprising that by the time he founded *The Riverdale Center of Religious Research* in Riverdale, New York in 1969 – the year I was born – he had become one of the world's greatest living cultural historians and religious scholars. By 1991, when we gathered in Assisi, Tom had been studying and teaching for nearly 57 years.

In Assisi, Tom's classes never ended and each class drew deeply from this wellspring of study. Literally an all-day affair, classes went from dawn to dusk, and sometimes late into the evening. Like children around a campfire, we students basked in the glow of Berry's mind, soaking in as much heat and light as we could. We sat with him at breakfast in the hotel, walked with him to the *Sacro Convento* for morning class, and followed him back to the hotel for lunch.

After a short break for lunch and homework, we would join him again for our afternoon class followed by dinner and frequent informal meetings in the *Piazza* to continue our conversation over wine or ice cream.

On one memorable morning he was explaining his position on the ecological crisis and his perspective on spiritual limitations of the conservative, mainstream leadership within the Catholic Church. Decrying the church's lack of response to the crisis, his voice rose slightly as he said: "I am more orthodox than the Pope!" (Berry 1991) Berry was very blunt and deadly serious when he said, "We must recover the cosmological or we will die." (Berry 1991) He went on to stress the absurdity of the Church's historic suppression of creation-centered mystics like Saint Francis, Hildegard von Bingen, and Julian of Norwich, to name a few and joked that the only reason he had not been excommunicated by the Catholic Church was simply that they didn't understand his work.

The irony of Tom making this statement in the heart of the *Sacro Convento* was not lost on me. Growing up in the bible belt of the south, I was familiar with the problems and limitations of fundamentalism and biblical literalism within mainstream Christianity. Berry's views validated my experience in a way that was deeply satisfying and challenged me to question how a Catholic tradition that celebrates the cosmological vision of Saint Francis could push an agenda that was so profoundly disconnected from the natural world and to the major sociological and ecological issues of our times.

Throughout his life, Berry conveyed a sense of urgency about the global environmental crisis that we cannot ignore. "We are working with what is perhaps the most precious reality in the universe – the earth—and we are spoiling it." (Berry 1991, 97) To remedy this cultural pathology, Berry emphasized the profound and unique achievement in the development of human conscious awareness as it is manifested in the universe through the emergence of the human.

According to Berry and Swimme, “The story of the human is the story of the emergence and development of...self-awareness and its role in the universe...” They speak of a “new faculty of understanding” that exploded into existence in the form of human consciousness, which created a special power where “the Earth and the universe itself as a whole,” developed the ability to “turn back and reflect on itself.” (Swimme and Berry 1992, 143) Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, one of Berry’s greatest influences, summed this concept up beautifully when he said, “The human is the sum total of 15 billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself.” (Kenney 2010, 60)

The cosmic significance of this achievement cannot be underestimated. This is not simply a basic sense of human self-awareness, but “a special mode of conscious self-reflection” on a cosmic scale that takes on an even more profound meaning when combined with Berry’s concept of “sympathetic presence,” or an “understanding heart.” (Berry 2003, 96) This heightened sensitivity is not unlike the gift exhibited by St. Francis. Sympathetic presence is the conscious recognition of that reciprocal relationship or “mutual presence” between the universe and the human. “Understanding heart” arises when we gain insight into the non-dual, inner nature of the universe itself and recognize our deep interconnectivity with *All That Is*. This is what it means to infuse the world with a vision of the sacred. We are creatures that stand before creation, rapt in awe by the great mystery that envelops us all. “Awareness of an all pervading mysterious energy articulated in the infinite variety of natural forms seems to be the primary experience of human consciousness” (Berry 1988, 24), says Berry. “The universe [literally] shivers with wonder in the depth of the human” (Swimme 1985, 32), Swimme adds.

Berry would often point out that if you were born on the moon, your mind would be as barren and colorless as the lunar landscape. As humans, we are born out of the Earth, with the vast diversity of life and colors, of smells and tastes. According to Berry, our poetry, our art, and our music, emerge out of an experience of the beauty and diversity of our natural world. This

incredible diversity facilitates the development of the human psyche, of the human mind, and, most importantly, sympathetic presence. It is this gift of *communion with the natural world* and with *our fellow humans* that makes us most human and is the primary gift that we, as humans, bring to the universe. It is our destiny as a species to recover, celebrate and utilize this gift, and, if we do not cultivate it, our children will live in a profoundly diminished world. As Tom said in his seminal essay, *The New Story*:

Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events in their lives. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe. (Berry 1988, 131)

Though perhaps not a true “metanoia” in the sense that Saint Francis experienced, my first summer with Thomas Berry in Assisi was both extraordinary and seminal. His writings and teachings continue to inspire me to this day, shaping many of the core values I cherish. These include poetic and precious gifts in the form of a simple phrase or a complex and detailed historical perspective. In any form, Berry’s thoughts hold a timeless relevance.

Late one afternoon, after our studies at the *Sacro Convento*, I was walking slowly with Thomas through the *Piazza del Commune* as we returned to our hotel for dinner. I found myself both moved, and somewhat stunned by Berry’s wisdom and the depth of his inquiry over the course of nearly six decades of intense study and reflection. I was also freshly inspired by my recent encounter with the story of Saint Francis. I tried to articulate the power of my experience to Tom, but in my exuberance, I stumbled over my words as I tried to convey the profound impact of studying with him in beautiful Assisi, absorbing the assigned readings and engaging in in-depth, thought-provoking discussions with my teachers and fellow students. In my joy and excitement, I urged that we find a way to expand our small summer program so that students worldwide could share the same, extraordinary experience. As we continued to walk slowly together through the *Piazza*, he said matter-of-factly, in his soft, quavering voice, “You know Steve, we don’t need Assisi. We need an Assisi of the mind.”

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