

**Reflections
By Miriam Therese MacGillis**

**Thomas Berry Memorial
September 26, 2009
Cathedral of St. John the Divine**

As we gather here this evening, we hold in sorrow the loss of this most remarkable man, even as we reflect on the guidance he left us.

In the days and weeks after Thomas died, I would often feel that I had lost my most important compass for steering my life. He was so aligned with the great Lodestar pointing our direction into the future. He was also so accessible, if not generously engaging with our questions in conversation, then through his writings which gave such clarity and support especially when we were traveling in the darkest of nights or in the most turbulent of seas. He always held true to the direction of the future based firmly in his grasp of the past, reminding us of the magnitude of our journey out of these last years of the Cenozoic era

In situations of confusion such as these, Thomas would say that we must reach deep into the archetypal energy of the Universe. One of the archetypes to which he often referred was that of the Journey. He often spoke of the Exodus journey as the central motif of the Judeo-Christian world. He suggested that the universe was in a perpetual state of exodus and we might consider our own condition as a second great exodus journey in human historic time, this time referring to the exodus we are making out of the dying period of the Cenozoic era toward the dim, yet unformed foundations of the Ecozoic era. These

archetypal energies would, he said, nourish the dreams which would draw us into a sacred future.

As we are awakening to the dream of this uncertain future, I am reminded of the image given by Paul Hawken in his work *Blessed Unrest*, in which he describes these times as the greatest spiritual awakening in human history. He suggests that this awakening in people all over the Earth is like the immune system of Earth arising into consciousness. Perhaps these grassroots efforts are, in fact, bringing forth the contours of this Ecozoic possibility which Thomas describes.

But we are also reminded of the vastness of the challenge before us as we transition from our industrialized economic society to a more integral human-earth society. In *The Petroleum Interval*, a chapter of *The Great Work*, Thomas foretold the crisis in which we presently find ourselves. He foresaw the end of this era of cheap fossil fuels, as well as the impact our carbon-drenched atmosphere would have on causing global climate change. He also warned of the economic disruption that would occur as Earth was plunged deeper and deeper into deficit by our plundering economies. He told us that a “new sensitivity would be needed, a sensitivity that is something more than romantic attachment to the natural world but one that comprehends the larger patterns of nature and its severe demands, a sensitivity that would be willing to see the human diminish so that other life forms may flourish”.

To develop this sensitivity, he knew we must rely once again on the wisdom of community, but a more comprehensive understanding of community, which had to be understood as the entire universe. He said:

My own suggestion is that we must go far beyond any transformation of contemporary culture. We must go back to the genetic imperative from which human cultures emerge originally and from which they can never be separated without losing their integrity and their survival capacity. None of our existing cultures can deal with this situation out of its own resources. We must invent or re-invent a sustainable culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive resources...what is needed is not transcendence but inscendence, not the brain but the gene.

In moments of confusion such as the present, we are not left simply to our own contrivances. We are supported by the ultimate powers of the universe as they make themselves present to us through the spontaneities within our own beings...not with naive simplicity but with critical appreciation...This intimacy with our genetic endowment, and through this endowment with the larger cosmic process, is not primarily the role of the philosopher, or the priest or the prophet or professor. It is the role of the shamanic personality which journeys into the far regions of the cosmic mystery and brings back the vision and the power needed by the community at the most basic level.

And again he says that not only is the “shamanic type emerging in our society, but also the shamanic dimension of the psyche itself.

Thomas suggested that the sensitivity to this deep archetypal world was already emerging and manifesting itself as the rising global ecological movement in its three aspects: the *confrontational*, seeking to stop or slow down the destruction, the *transformational* within the various human professions and institutions, and the *creative* which he identified as the bioregional movement where people ground themselves and their efforts within the primacy of a particular community of place.

It may be as we journey toward an Ecozoic era that we claim a new type of compass: one coiled with the genetic coding of every cell in our bodies, in the marrow of our bones and in the complexity of the infinite layers of our psyches.

Let us now align ourselves with a new lodestar. Polaris, the North Star of an earlier age is eclipsed by the light of the primeval lodestar, the initial fireball. We carry the magnetic attraction of an earlier lodestone now within our own bodies. We are ourselves like living needles pointing unflinchingly to that first flaring forth, shining through the depths of time and space to hold us, even here, this evening, in our moment of sorrow and loss and overwhelming gratitude for this special man.

Two poems come to mind:

One is by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats entitled *Easter 1916*. In this poem Yeats described not only the people and conditions surrounding the Easter uprising which took place in central Dublin in 1916, but also the cost it would require of those involved, especially the compatriots who were court marshaled and shot for their role in awakening a dream of freedom from the oppressive suffocation of British rule. Two phrases stand out in his description of the days before those events: the grayness of life and the “wearing of motley” to describe the ordinariness of the people who awakened this new dream in themselves. Both images describe the unbearable conditions for the human spirit caught between two contradictory worlds and ripe for an exodus, conditions not unlike those hanging over the these last days of the Cenozoic era. But Yeats also spoke of the sacrifice demanded:

*“We know their dream: enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?”*

And then his central motif for the uprising:

*“All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.”*

The second poem is by William Stafford from his collection *The Way It Is*, where he might be describing our place in aligning with the lodestar of the emergent universe:

A shudder goes through the universe, even long after. Every star, clasping its meaning as it looks back, races outward where something quiet and far waits. Within, too, even receding into its factions, that first brutal sound nestles closer and closer toward the tiny dot of tomorrow. And here we are in the middle, holding it all together, not even shaking.

Hard to believe.

So here we are tonight, in this place, all companions on this journey, giving ourselves to the great work of holding it all together. And “not even shaking. Hard to believe.”

Ah, Thomas. In your *small self* while you were with us, and in the *great self* to which you have returned: you have unleashed in us a terrible beauty...