

## **The Thomas Berry Foundation Award to the Thomas Berry Forum**

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I first met Thomas Berry in my senior year of undergraduate study at Fordham University. During those weeks of the fall semester of 1970, studying “The Religious Traditions of China” , his tremendous erudition as an historian of religion, explicating the wisdom of Confucius and Mencius, Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-Ming, Lao Tzu and Chuang tzu, opened horizons that set the course for my own future study. Over the next subsequent years as a graduate student in the History of Religions program which he himself had founded at Fordham, I was consistently animated by his own dedication to interreligious understanding through fidelity to primary texts and the traditions which they reflected. Yet, even as he schooled us in the rigorous art of precise textual analysis and interpretation, he himself was listening to a voice whose wisdom and urgency he would speak with such singular clarity and beauty, the voice of Earth. Later, as I gave myself to the demands and thrall of Indian and Chinese Buddhist texts which were the focus for my doctoral dissertation, my illustrious teacher once again immeasurably expanded the horizons of my then current and future endeavor. As my dissertation’s mentor, I would report to him on my progress through the idioms of Buddhist metaphysics and psychology. Ever attentive and always supportive, he in turn would engage me in the idiom of his own then present work, woven of cosmology, geology, physics, biology and cultural history. Only in such an expansively cosmic, evolutionary context could the true significance of Earth be celebrated, rather than plundered, by its most wayward and destructive species.

How would Buddhism respond to such a story; how would its traditional wisdom and compassion actualize fresh expression in this new universe-earth-human story, in the face of the most profound planetary suffering and delusion? Such was the unsettling, consistent, however implicit, challenge of Thomas Berry to all students of human religious traditions, a challenge which might yet evoke renewed creativity at our present moment of global interreligious dialogue. Yet, the reach of his vision extends beyond religious discourse, and addresses all cultural institutions including law, economics and importantly, education.

The mission of the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona is, among other things, to educate for awareness of the integral Earth community. For Thomas Berry, Earth education implicates nothing less than the entire universe story of which the Earth is an extraordinary expression. In tracing the dynamic unfolding of the universe from its earliest particulate structure through its billionfold galactic emergence, and within the Milky Way, its further creative expression as our sun and its eight orbiting planets, Thomas Berry provides substantive coherence for the further narrative, as Earth gives birth to life and, ultimately, to human consciousness in which the fullness of the cosmic process becomes self-reflective. It is within the breadth and comprehensiveness of this integral story that the human attains proper self-understanding, from within which it may reinvent itself as the species which celebrates, rather than ravages the Earth body from which it has emerged.

The Thomas Berry Forum has sought to advance the primacy of that corrective universe-earth-human story of Berry's telling as the unifying focus for an interdisciplinary collaboration among the fields of biology, political science and religious studies. Similarly, such a model of interdisciplinary learning, unified and centered around Earth as the primary lens for a renewed and expanded college core curriculum is the most recent expression that the Forum celebrates

and seeks to further promote in the academic excellence, flourishing here at Iona. For their recognition of these institutional efforts as well as those to be indicated by Kevin, Danny and Kathleen, I join in my deepest gratitude to Mary Evelyn and John and the Thomas Berry Foundation for the award they here bestow on the work of the Forum.