

THOMAS BERRY
A Personal Perspective

By Daniel Martin

In the mid-nineteen eighties I left Africa where I had worked as a Catholic missionary priest for eleven years, because it seemed to me that the missionary message of the church was stuck in an earlier age and was not presenting a relevant message to the world that I encountered everyday. I came to the U.S. seeking new understanding and discovered that what was needed was, in fact, a new framework that would breathe life into the old forms. The message of Christianity, I believed, was still relevant, but it had become mired in institutional structures and politics and needed what Thomas Berry called a ‘new story’ to free it from itself.

When I met with Tom, as I called him, the first thing I experienced was relief. The reason is that I had come to see – and increasingly feel – myself as an outsider in my own home. Hearing Tom describe how an ‘old story’ (of origins and meaning) no longer helped us feel we belonged, was a critical validation of my experience over the previous decade. And it was his idea of the fundamental need for a ‘new story’ that shaped a dissertation on the meaning of mission in this new framework and helped me begin to come home again, to myself, to my community, even to a priesthood that had evaporated for me.

Ten years ago, soon after Tom’s passing, I sat with Kathleen in the diner across the street and we talked about taking this new story to new places and we came up with the idea of a forum for what we called ecological dialogue. For the previous couple of decades I had developed programs in the art of dialogue as a way of helping us tell the new story. As Tom would say, the scientific story offers only a skeleton that has to be fleshed out by the poets and artists into a living force for the creation of a new era. I felt that it also – and perhaps even more – needed all stories. For I believe that the new universe story needs the everyday stories of individuals in their unique situations in order to become the foundational narrative for their everyday lives. I think of my own N. Ireland where a new all-embracing universe story could serve as a container where the different stories there could be shared in an ecological dialogue that would generate shared understanding from their differences in the form a new N. Ireland narrative for all the communities there. I’m actually planning to go there next spring to immerse myself for a couple of months in that emerging narrative.

This has, in fact, been the focus on my own efforts under the aegis of the Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue. So, while Brian has focused on the academic community, Kathleen on the religious communities, and Kevin on the United Nations, though, of course, we also do many other things separately and together, I have focused on convening groups in a number of fields to help us discover the new narratives we need for a sustainable future in these various fields. Thus I work with therapists, teachers, health care professionals, churches, and local communities with a simple model, that I call Mindfulness Dialogue.

But I do what I do inspired and supported by my Berry Forum colleagues. We come together for what we call executive meetings but which are more accurately spiritual gatherings that are our

own way of expanding the new story. There we explore our deepening appreciation of the gift of Thomas Berry and share our experiences in bringing this gift to various venues.

That day in the diner across the street when Kathleen and I first spoke of the Berry Forum idea, we reflected on how wonderful it would be to convene those of us who have been grasped by Thomas Berry's vision and share our stories as a kind of second Berry chapter. Perhaps today is a little taste of that chapter.

I appreciate the award, Mary Evelyn and John – thank you – not simply as an acknowledgment of our efforts (though that too), but, more importantly as a way of encouraging us all to reach out in ever-widening circles to include all of us in the continuous great song that God is singing through us. In the Mindfulness Dialogue model we use poetry as a kind of catalyst for our interaction. As a way of pulling our gathering together, let me share a short piece by Rumi that captures what I believe the Berry Forum is essentially about:

‘Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
There is a field. I’ll meet you there
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn’t make any sense.’

This field is a real place in ourselves – our true self; where we meet God; where we connect with everyone and everything. As Merton describes it, this little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is only in the experience of this field – this force field – that new life can happen: where the New Story can be realized; where we can collaborate in ways that generate true learning, true healing, true becoming. The experience of this field comes through a form of dialogue, for the roots of the word – *dia*, through and *logos*, meaning – suggest that dialogue is actually participation in the emergence of meaning. The goal of the Berry Forum is this field; ecological dialogue is the way. It is where the soul lies down in that grass and discovers a world where the phrase each other doesn't make any sense. It is what Thomas Berry calls a ‘communion of subjects’ that generates life and God.

Exercise:

Breathe...Notice thoughts (‘ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing’) and let them go..

Breathe together – lie down in that grass, for a moment

Conspire..make conspiracy. Singing is breathing together = an essential conspiracy

There has never been a movement without song == **Song.....**