

"Thomas: My Great Red Oak"

chapter contributed by Michael Dowd to Thomas Berry Tribute
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"To the Great Red Oak, beneath whose sheltering branches this book was written." — Thomas Berry

Much of what I value most about my life I owe to Thomas Berry. Without his influence, my ministry, my sense of life purpose, my lifestyle, my marriage, would all be radically different. Today I feel like I'm the richest man alive. In 2 million years of human existence, there's no time I'd rather be alive than now. Of the 6.7 billion people alive in the world today, there's nobody doing anything I'd rather be doing. Thomas Berry made it all possible.

The epigraph above comes from the dedication page of Thomas Berry's 1988 book, *The Dream of the Earth*. I first encountered Thomas's ideas thanks to Albert LaChance, a cultural therapist and gifted Great Story educator. On February 1, 1988 I drove to Boston for the first session of a course titled "The New Catholic Mysticism." Albert, who had studied one-on-one with Thomas for five years, began his instruction by telling the scientific story of the Universe in a way that I had never heard it told before—as a sacred epic. Less than an hour into the evening, goosebumps covered on my arms and legs, and I began to weep. I knew without a doubt that I would spend the rest of my life sharing this perspective as Great News.

What I found so riveting, so compelling, about Thomas's thinking was that it integrated science and religion, reason and faith, and made sense of my world and the challenges we face as a species. It also offered a clear and realistically hopeful path forward — individually and collectively. Knowing that I was the universe becoming conscious of itself, that I was connected to all life, and that cosmic, Earth, biological, and human history could be understood in religiously inspiring ways shifted everything.

I made a number of pilgrimages to Riverdale, New York, where Thomas lived. We would eat and talk and Thomas would lend me books to read. On one such visit, I asked him if I might sleep under the Great Red Oak. "Of course," he replied with a smile.

That evening, I unrolled my sleeping bag and settled in beneath this majestic being with a mix of excitement, peace, and almost more gratitude than I could bear. As I lay looking up at this 500 year old elder — one of the oldest red oaks in the Hudson River valley — I was moved to tears.

My evangelizing of the evolutionary epic began shortly thereafter, as an avocation wedged into the rest of my life. Even so, virtually everything I've preached and written since then has been in service of a religiously inspiring understanding of evolution, such that others, too, might experience our common creation story as gospel and be inspired to love and serve accordingly.

In June of 2001 I married science writer and long-time epic of evolution enthusiast Connie Barlow. We said our vows at the EarthSpirit Rising Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, an event honoring Thomas Berry. Since April 2002, Connie and I have been full-time "evolutionary evangelists." We live permanently on the road, offering a spiritually nourishing view of evolution throughout North America. In the tradition of traveling preachers, we gave up our worldly possessions, left our home, and now carry everything we need in our van. We go wherever we are invited. Our goal is to inspire people of all ages and theological orientations to embrace the history of everyone and everything in personally and socially transforming ways.

In our first seven years on the road, we have spoken to more than a thousand groups – from the devoutly religious to the rabidly anti-religious. Everywhere we go we awaken people to the life-giving perspective that Thomas so beautifully and powerfully embodied and wrote about.

Our lives are full of joy, adventure, and deep communion with the amazing North American continent ("Nora"), which Thomas Berry also revered in his prose and poetry. My love affair with Nora, my ministry, my relationship with my beloved wife and mission partner: none of these would be real in my life had it not been for Thomas Berry.

I will forever be grateful for the life, the writings, and the friendship of this truly great man. He will always be my Great Red Oak.

Michael Dowd is the author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, which has been endorsed by 6 Nobel laureates and other science luminaries, including noted skeptics, and by religious leaders across the spectrum. Since April 2002, he and his wife, Connie Barlow, an acclaimed science writer, have travelled North America sharing a sacred view of evolution with religious and secular audiences of all ages.