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Iona College program to further Thomas Berry's 'Great Work'

Sharon Abercrombie | Apr. 10, 2013 Eco Catholic

Lisette Noisette is a talented young poet. One of her creations -- a personal act of contrition to Earth -- would make a beautiful opening prayer for upcoming Earth Day observances.

> Please forgive me ... forgive me for scratching your dry skin and draining up your veins ... What am I going to do without you? If you die, I will no longer live.
>
> If you suffer I will feel your pain ... let me learn more about your mystery. Let you touch the sky with my exhausted hope. Stay a little longer so I can fix the mistakes. You are my only shelter, my unequalled home. My only earth. Please forgive me.

Noisette, 21, a senior majoring in religious/international studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., has posted "Forgive Me" on YouTube [1], accompanied by music and environmental photos. It is the Spanish-speaker?s first poem written in her second language, English.

For much of her life, Noisette has walked in the beauty of the Dominican Republic, with its palm trees, sparkling sea and tall mountains. When Noisette was 16, she saw Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth." It was an upsetting eye-opener.

"That's when I realized the challenges of global warming," she said, appalled by the harm it could possibly bring to her home. But what could one person do, especially a teenager?

Noisette now has a framework for action: Fr. Thomas Berry's 1999 book *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future [2]*. *The Great Work* is Berry's blueprint for teaching humans how to tread gently upon the planet.

A Passionist priest, geologist, cultural historian and pioneer in the field of spirituality and ecology, Berry (1914-2009) saw universities as the best containers for reinventing humanity at the species level.

Religious institutions "are too pious, the corporations too plundering, the government too subservient to provide any adequate remedy," he wrote. But universities have both insight and freedom to guide the human community by influencing the "professions and other activities of society."

Universities' access to the younger generation places them in an advantageous place for fostering re-enchantment and awe for the beauty of the universe, Berry believed.

If people could grasp the concept that everything in nature is the direct descendant of stardust, that evolution's path took those elements and turned them into the "lyrical beauty" we see around us, then how could we continue to threaten these wondrous forms of life expression? How could we continue to destroy the sources of the food, clothing and shelter we depend on for survival? he asked.

Iona College has taken Berry's words to heart. Given her concerns for the Earth community, Noisette is studying in the right place at the right time.

Since her freshman year, she has immersed herself in religious studies classes about the natural world, the creation-centered mystics and the New Universe Story.

She has attended campuswide programs on the environment in her four years at Iona. A forum named for Berry regularly brings in speakers and programs that often include music, chanting and dance.

"The creative life is what is going to save the planet," said Sr. Kathleen Deignan, a sister of the Congregation of Notre Dame, director of the school's religious studies department and founder of the Iona Spirituality Institute.

"We really have a moral obligation to give our students a real picture of this world crisis and to aid them in finding creative solutions," she said.

Deignan, president of the International Thomas Merton Society, is a sacred songwriter and psalmist who has published more than 200 songs through Schola Ministries. During the 1980s, she studied with Berry at Fordham University. A member of the Iona faculty for more than 30 years, Deignan once brought her mentor to campus to present his paper on "The American College in the Ecological Age."

After Berry died in June 2009, Deignan and three friends who also studied with him felt called to carry on their beloved teacher's environmental legacy.

While driving back from his funeral at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont, they began to look at ways to carry out their dream. They decided to initiate a forum, the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue, built around his belief that "the human exists, survives and becomes whole only within the single great community of the planet Earth."

The group included Brian Brown, professor of religious studies at Iona; Daniel Martin, religious consultant for the U.N. Environment Programme and a creator of the Environmental Sabbath for religious groups; and Edmund Rice Christian Br. Kevin Cawley, editor of the Carbon Ranger Newsletter and a U.N. representative for his religious community on behalf of young people and creation care.

The forum has since sponsored a number of activities and speakers on environmental "Great Work" leaders, including Hildegard of Bingen, a creation-centered mystic, and Wangari Maathai, founder of The Green Belt Movement [3] in Kenya.

Last October, the Environmental Consortium of Colleges and Universities presented its first "Great Work" award to Deignan, Brown, Martin and Cawley for their forum work and for inspiring a new interdepartmental environmental studies program at Iona.

The premise supporting the new program is how different environmental disciplines can further Berry's "Great Work." It officially began in fall of 2012.

How many kinds of "Great Work" are there? The expanding universe could serve as the creative model here: Once a heart is engaged, there are countless ways to work for the good of the planet.

Tricia Mulligan, chair and associate professor of political science at Iona, described the program: Politics and policy, the first track, will prepare future graduates for careers that influence environmental policy. A religious studies concentration is designed for students interested in ministry or social and environmental entrepreneurship. The sustainability through science track will help students learn how to become sustainability

coordinators in ecological and environmental literacy.

All majors take a minimum of two classes in religious studies, "Religion in the Natural World" and "Foundational Cosmology and Earth History."

Mulligan's students are learning how the U.S. Department of Defense and the military have begun to minimize their environmental impact during exercises and training, and they've been clued in to how Botswana uses its Security Defense Force to protect natural resources. One environmental politics class teaches how to identify key points around the issues and what the trade-offs are.

This semester, students in one class are participating in a role-play simulation on climate change. "Their job is to restart the Doha climate change process and try to create some binding action to address the problem," Mulligan said.

Approximately 200 students are enrolled in these beginning classes as they decide whether to declare a major or minor in the new program.

Noisette will graduate later this spring. Her classmate Paul Lucadamo, 28, graduated in January with majors in religious studies and psychology and a minor in philosophy. Both are too late to take advantage of this new program, but have immersed themselves in enough of Deignan's and Brown's religious studies classes to envision their own "Great Work."

Noisette plans to study Arabic to prepare herself for graduate school studies in theology and the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And then? She hopes to find an environmental spirituality position somewhere within the international forum.

Lucadamo wants to buy land so he can start a biodynamic farm. He envisions it as part of an eco-community for emotionally disturbed and mentally handicapped people. There will be an animal sanctuary hospital, an organic restaurant and eco-educational facilities.

It will be a haven for individuals like his brother, Gino, who has epilepsy. Lucadamo is certain direct contact with the earth, animals and birds will be able to foster a deep healing and sense of self-worth that hasn't happened for Gino in other settings.

"I always felt the staffs could do more, but they were so disengaged," he said.

Like Noisette, Lucadamo is heartsick over environmental degradation. A former construction job brought the issue front and center for him.

"We ignore the ground," he said. "We cover it over with blacktop."

Until Lucadamo can locate his spot in nature, he is working as a park ranger to help support his young family. He and his wife, Erica, have a 5-month-old son, Ryan.

Last January, Lucadamo's teachers named him as Iona's first Young Berry Scholar.

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Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7fVFkITFII

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Great-Work-Our-into-Future/dp/0609804995
[3] http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/