

Cosmology and Spiritual Direction

Awakening to the story of the Universe in our lives



by

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We are living in the midst of a moment of Grace¹ – Thomas Berry

Passion for cosmology goes way back to my childhood and my fascination with the stars and the beauty of nature. My roots are in the Celtic tradition and my heart now resonates with Maori spirituality, as I grow in appreciation of some of the ecological wisdom of the Indigenous tradition. Hearing Brian Swimme speaking in Dublin many years ago fired my passion and the images he used of our expansive galaxies took my breath away. A Retreat directed by Judy Cannato in Ireland stretched my horizons when she invited us to contemplatively enter into a way of living that embraced the connectedness of all that is. My journey as a Presentation Sister deepens my yearning for union with the living God present in the mystery of the unfolding of creation. In the last two years my spiritual direction training has caused me to ask as Mary Oliver did ‘*What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*’² Spiritual direction helps me to listen to that question, to ponder it deeply and to try to answer it. In my own experience of being a directee and my beginning experiences of being a spiritual director I recognise that deep connection with nature is a very significant part of the spiritual journey. As Hillman says ‘*An individual’s harmony with his or her own deep self requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonization with the environmental world.*’³

We are privileged and challenged that our generation is the first to have access to a scientifically accurate story of the origins of the universe, and today there is a growing awareness of earth’s essential interrelatedness. We want to ‘*catch a glimpse of God’s action in the world in a way that is consistent with science and to reconnect ourselves with our Earth, particularly at this time when so much ecological damage is being done by the human community.*’⁴ The New Cosmology opens us to a new level of relationship to ourselves, to all of creation, to the universe and to our understanding of the evolving presence of God. I would like to explore the cosmological context in which all of these relationships take place and how these understandings influence our Ministry of Spiritual Direction. A question relevant to this exploration is: How can we as spiritual directors integrate our understanding of the new cosmology into our practice?

A new understanding of God

Before addressing this, I wish to reflect on an understanding of God which flows from our appreciation of the Universe Story. According to John F. Haught⁵ – ‘*The main problem is that science has given us a picture of the universe that seems to have outgrown the images and concepts of God that most Christians take for granted.*’

While some see modern science as a challenge to faith, Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio sees it as an opportunity to think in new ways about God, creation, and the incarnation, drawing on the

¹ T. Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), p.198

² Oliver Mary, *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press 1992. ‘The Summer Day’, p.94

³ Moran Terrence J. CSSR, *Presence – An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* Vol 15, No 3. Sept 2009 p.8

⁴ Duffy, Kathleen, SSJ, PhD. *The Role of Wisdom Sophia in the Universe Story*. Adapted From Teilhard to Omega. P.1

⁵ Delio Ilia, *From Teilhard to Omega, Co-creating an Unfinished Universe*, Orbis Books 2014. J.F. Haught p.10

wisdom of Teilhard de Chardin. Our image of God is changing and evolving as we move towards greater wholeness. Jesus is a whole maker and we are called to be wholemakers at this time. Living on the brink of evolutionary change means that new ground is being broken and new consciousness is being raised. *‘The God of evolution is a God of “newness” because God is a dynamic communion of Persons in love. The doctrinal name for this reality is Trinity.’*⁶ God is deeply personal, deeply relational; everything bears the footprint of the Trinity. So if God is the creator of this cosmos, we’re talking about a very dynamic God, not a static God. This is a God who is engaged and relational, a God of dynamic love. These discoveries challenge us in spiritual direction to rethink the meaning of Jesus Christ and his mission in a universe that is still coming to be. *‘This consciousness invites a deeper contemplation of the God-Mystery, and a rethinking of many of our prior theological understandings.’*⁷

Thomas Aquinas says that *‘A mistake in one’s understanding of Creation will necessarily cause a mistake in one’s understanding of God.’* *‘If what Thomas says is true, we must accept the challenge to rethink and reshape our relationship to the divine in a way that resonates with the new discoveries about creation.’*⁸ A new understanding of reality evokes a new understanding of God. In traditional cosmology, God intervenes as an external cause to bring all creatures into being. In the new cosmology, God is seen as an internal cause, an immediate presence in the unfolding of the entire universe. We are in a transition from thinking that God is above, to realizing that our expanding cosmos is infused and alive with divinity. Modern science provides new understandings of creation, so thoughtful believers need to expand their images of God to match today’s worldview.

*‘We humans are in the process of shifting our perception from a worldview in which everything is solid, fixed and permanent . . . to a universe in constant change . . . expanding, and . . . in the process of evolving . . . We are no longer the separate, autonomous beings we once thought we were.’*⁹ But the new science and the breakthroughs in cosmology provide a new context within which we search for meaning. Within this context, we as spiritual directors need to reflect and articulate anew how the universe began, the role of the human within it, and who God is. *‘We are called to see the core of religion – love truth goodness and beauty – written into the very fabric of the cosmos.’*¹⁰

Three key aspects of the Universe:

Given the vast amount of literature available on Cosmology, I intend to narrow my focus to three *‘key aspects of the universe’*¹¹ explored by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in ‘The Universe Story’. These three permeate the total evolutionary process of the universe:

⁶ Delio Ilia, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, God, Evolution, and the Power of Love*, Orbis 2013. Introd. xxiv

⁷ Maitland, Mary C. *A Christian Earth-Centred Spirituality and Spiritual Direction* SGM Research Project 1999.

⁸ Cannato, Judy, *Radical Amazement*, Sorin Books 2006. Introduction p.7

⁹ Prevallet, Elaine S.L. *Interconnections*, Vol 33. No. 1. Spring 2012 p.18

¹⁰ Delio, Ilia, *From Teilhard to Omega, Co-creating an Unfinished Universe*, Orbis Books 2014. Introduction p.3

¹¹ Swimme Brian, Berry Thomas, *The Universe Story*.

*‘Interiority (autopoiesis), differentiation (diversity) and communion.’*¹² They have operated and continue to operate throughout time and space in The Universe Story. They are highly complex, interconnected and ongoing processes. They are significant for Spiritual Direction in these emerging times. They are like the *‘golden threads of Divine Wisdom with which God has woven the fabric of the Universe’*.¹³

Interiority –The essence of everything is Divine Fire and each thing has an inherent potential to grow into fullness... – *‘to be is to be a centre of creativity’*

Differentiation/Diversity – everything is different from everything else ... *‘to be is to be unique’*

Communion – everything is related to everything else ... we are ONE ... *‘to be is to be related’*¹⁴

Terrence J. Moran raises a challenging question: *‘Can a spiritual direction relationship be authentic if it ignores the cosmological context in which all relationship takes place?’*¹⁵ These three basic laws of the universe provide an opportunity to get a little glimpse of how spiritual direction can engage with the cosmological context. We recognise that the Creator has been creating from the very beginning, Creation is now present tense. The universe is a single, continuous event happening even as we live and move and evolution is continuing in the hearts of the director and directee. There is no outer evolution without inner evolution.

Interiority:

In this new view everything is unique, with its own intelligence and strategy, intriguing and mysterious. The journey in spiritual direction of being true to self, of being authentic reflects this dynamic of interiority. Iliia Delio reminds us that *‘we cannot creatively evolve without attending to the divine breath of life within us.’*¹⁶ Spiritual direction provides space within our lives for something new to happen, we are invited to pay attention to what is being revealed in our lives, enabling us to live in more contemplative awareness than we normally do. Spiritual direction calls us to be rooted in stillness, contemplation and wonder at the unfolding Mystery of God and of all God’s creation. As C.G. Jung says *‘Too few people have experienced the divine image as the innermost possession of their own souls.’*¹⁷

Science calls us to a new awareness of how all life is interconnected and evolving. This evolution of consciousness requires cooperation of the director and directee with the creation process through free choice: learning, sharing, trusting in God's help to move with evolution into a new understanding of Holy Mystery and of ourselves in creation. It highlights the wonder that everything we need is within; we need to bring it to full birth. 1 Cor. 1: 7:¹⁸ *‘Just think — you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for the revelation of Christ.’*

¹² Swimme Brian, Berry Thomas, *The Universe Story*. p.72

¹³ Presentation Sisters, *Hearts of fire*. 2014. Introduction. Also cf. Duffy Kathleen SSSJ, PhD – *The Role of Wisdom Sophia in the Universe Story*.

¹⁴ Fox Matthew, *Original Blessing* – Newsletter Oakland 1997

¹⁵ Moran Terrence J. CSSR, *Presence – An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* Vol 15, No 3. Sept 2009 p.7

¹⁶ Delio Iliia, workshop in Ireland organised by Presentation Sisters, July 2014.

¹⁷ Dourley John P. *On Behalf of the Mystical Fool: Jung on the Religious Situation*. Routledge 2010

¹⁸ Peterson Eugene H. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. 1994

Many people experience the sacred for the first time in their relationship with nature. In spiritual direction the relationship of the directee with nature can be explored and deepened. It is about coming home to ourselves and coming home to the Cosmos.

*'At a certain point you say
to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world,
Now I am ready,*

*Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.
You empty yourself and wait, listening ...'*¹⁹

Diversity:

We live in a Universe of unending variety; everything reflects God in some way. Each person is unique and a mystery. God is really creative and imaginative. Everything brought into being is loved into being in a unique way. What happens to the nonhuman happens to the human. If we impoverish our outer world we become impoverished in all that makes us human. This has implications for spiritual direction and the attentiveness with which we relate with the environment. The environment where spiritual direction happens has potential to nourish the spiritual direction session and deepen the connection with the wonder and beauty of the created world. Retreat centres are often located in areas of great natural beauty and can lead us to deeper intimacy with our natural surroundings. Teilhard de Chardin reminds us that everything is sacred to those who know how to see.

Each person brings their own unique life experience to spiritual direction; the director does not bring the issue of cosmology but provides a larger canvas for exploring the journey towards meaning. The making and breaking of God images can be part of the unfolding journey of spiritual direction. I think the image we have of God, also determines the way we see, treat and relate to God! Our understanding of God affects everything. We know from experience in spiritual direction that the images and stories that engage our imagination shape who we are and will become.

*'The Christian is one who is connected
through the heart to the whole of life,
attuned to the deeper intelligence of nature,
and called forth irresistibly by the Spirit
to creatively express his or her gifts
in the evolution of self and the world.....'*²⁰ Ilia Delio

The more intimately we become acquainted with anything, it seems, the clearer our recognition of its differences with anything else in the world. In spiritual direction opportunities are provided to not only welcome but also seek out the opportunity to experience diversity, valuing the richness it brings.

¹⁹ Dillard Annie, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. Harper & Row, 1982

²⁰ Delio Ilia OSF, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being. God, Evolution, and the Power of Love*. Orbis 2013

*'Each one of us matters, has a role to play, makes a difference ... Together we must re-establish our connections with the natural world and with the Spiritual Power that is around us.'*²¹

Communion:

And with regard to communion, relationship is the essence of existence. Nothing is itself without everything else. If we have all emerged from the same cosmic source we need to remember that all creatures are part of a single community of life. This recognition of our communion relationship with the entire web of life is fundamental for spiritual direction. To be is to be related. Much of our existence finds fulfilment in relatedness. So much of the colour and dance and song of the world come from our desire to enter relationships. The energy we and other animals bestow on this work of relatedness reveals something of the ultimate meaning of communal experience. In Thomas Berry's words, *'this capacity for bonding of the components of the Universe with each other enables the vast variety of beings to come into existence in that gorgeous profusion that we observe about us.'*²²

It is important to provide a reflective space for directees to awaken to the Spirit of God present and active in all that exists, to a Spirituality of Being in Communion in this time of deepening conviction of our connectedness. *'The holy energy that set the galaxies swirling is the same holy energy that Spiritual Directors sense in the space between them and a spiritual directee'*²³ (T. Moran)

We all come from the same stardust and we all are unique. What an amazing revelation that *'I am made of stardust, that every part and parcel of who I am materially was once a piece of a star shining in the heavens. The air I breathe is the air that has circled the globe and drawn in and out by people, creatures and vegetation in lands and seas far away.'*²⁴ Joyce Rupp.

The insights from the new story of evolution provide us with more opportunities to find meaning and to relish wonder and awe. Judy Cannato captures it well when she says: *'When I try to wrap my mind around what some researchers are saying about life on both the micro and macro levels, I can scarcely take it in. The notion that after two energy fields (and each of us is an energy field) encounter one another they are forever connected fills me with reverent wonder. When I learn that all matter that now exists was formed billions of years ago and has been recycling since the beginning of time and that each of us is composed of the same matter or energy of all that has gone before us, I stand in awe.'*²⁵

Philip Newell captures the essence of communion when he says:

'The Spirit is doing a new thing. It is springing forth now in our consciousness, among every people, in every discipline, in every walk of life.... Will we, (as spiritual directors)

²¹ Goodall Jane, *Reasons for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*. 1999

²² Ecozoic times, *Awakening the Story of the Universe in Our Lives*. Celebrating Thomas Berry Centenary in Oakland. 2014

²³ Moran Terrence J. CSSR, *Presence – An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* Vol 15, No 3. Sept 2009 p13

²⁴ Rupp Joyce, *Walking in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino*. Orbis 2011. Introduction.

²⁵ Presentation Sisters, *Hearts of Fire. Legacy and Spirituality of Nano Nagle. A Flame of Hope for Our Time*. P.6.

*open to this moment of grace and be led into relationships of oneness we could never before have imagined?'*²⁶

Conclusion:

We have a challenging task ahead of us as Spiritual Directors: to help each other move into a much larger, more encompassing frame of awareness, and to find the language to express our new awareness of God's creating presence pervading the whole universe. This too has implications for incorporating the New Cosmology into training of spiritual directors.

*'Christian life is an adventure, God's adventure in love. We need to recapture a sense of this cosmic adventure in love and that we're part of it.'*²⁷ As spiritual directors we need to reflect on the new horizons evoked by the New Cosmology. *'These are the revelatory thresholds of our time, calling us to encounter ultimacy and meaning in a novel and challenging context. God comes alive in our world, and the divine permeates on a scale our limited imaginations can only vaguely comprehend.'*²⁸ Spiritual direction is at the service of right relationships on every level, within the person, between people, among people, with the entire cosmos, with the Holy. We encounter the relational God at the heart of a relational universe, we too are relational creatures. We belong to a greater whole, held forever in the gracious embrace of divine abandonment. We come home to where we really belong, to the universe itself.

*'How important it is that we learn the Sacred Story of our Evolutionary Universe, just as we have learned our cultural/religious stories. Each day we will begin to do what humans do best: be amazed! Be filled with reverence! Contemplate! Fall in Love! Be entranced by the wonder of the Universe, the uniqueness of each being, the beauty of creation, its new revelation each day, and the Divine Presence within all!'*²⁹

²⁶ Newell Philip J. *A New Harmony*: St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh 2012. Epilogue p.175

²⁷ US Catholic Magazine: Universal Saviour *Ilia Delio* reimagines Christ. April 2011. Vol. 76. No. 4 p18-21

²⁸ O'Murchu Diarmuid, *Quantum Theology, Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*. Crossroad NY.1997

²⁹ Southard Mary, *Spiritearth* 1994

A deep zest for life:

Brian Swimme says ‘*Cosmology, when it is alive and healthy in a culture, evokes in the human a deep zest for life.*’³⁰ This deep zest for life is evident in Mary Oliver’s Poem ‘The Sun’³¹

The Sun

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful

than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone –
and how it slides again

out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance –
and have you ever felt for anything

such wild love-
do you think there is anywhere, in any language
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure
that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed

*‘Let us begin each morning and live each day inside this simple truth: A gorgeous living earth drifts light as a feather around the great roaring generosity of the sun. Such is the way of the sun; such is the way we are called to be.’*³² Brian Thomas Swimme.

Such is the way we too are called to be in spiritual direction at this moment of grace.

³⁰ Swimme Brian, www.greatnewstory.com/the-hidden-heart-of-the-cosmos

³¹ Oliver Mary, *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press 1992. *The Sun*. P.50

³² Swimme Brian, www.greatnewstory.com/the-hidden-heart-of-the-cosmos

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