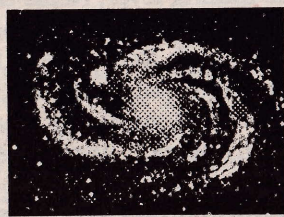


Earth Story, Sacred Story, Universe Story

by Father Charles A.E. Brandt (Yde)
Black Creek



(This is part one of a 3-part series on the Universe Story)

We explain things by telling their story—how they came into being and the changes that have taken place over the course of time, whether minutes or millennia ... This is especially true in explaining those profound formative influences that have shaped our sense of the sacred. So writes Thomas Berry, co-author with Brian Swimme of *The Universe Story*.

In the midst of a desert you find a little patch of life, an oasis. Our earth is a fragile blue-green oasis, alive in the lifeless expanse of black space. The survival of our increasingly endangered oasis urgently requires an earth-human relationship in which people understand and respect the natural processes that keep the oasis alive. The coming into being of such an endearing relationship requires the union of the old and the new.

Since neolithic times (12,000 years ago) we have been working out of a human-divine, human-human set of relationships, to the almost total exclusion of an earth-human relationship. If we are to move into the future it is necessary to bring the human community into a greater presence of the natural world in a mutually enhancing manner to form a single sacred community.

Human assaults on the planet today are of a new kind and scale. Symptoms include depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer, which is essential to protect people and crops and ocean microlife from solar ultraviolet radiation.

Carbon dioxide buildup, threatens a global greenhouse effect and worldwide climatic changes. Acid rain; increasing levels of chemical, radioactive and other toxic pollutants in water, air and soils are contributing to a rise in cancers and other environmentally-induced diseases, health problems and genetic damage.

There is loss of topsoil and increasing desertification which contributes to hunger and starvation for millions. Chemical and biological, as well as nuclear weapons are threats. The massive destruction of rainforests, with the loss of vital watersheds and the depletion of the Earth's oxygen supply, further compounding the carbon-dioxide threat is another symptom.

The life of the Earth is also threatened by the loss of millions of plant and animal species due to over-industrialization, deforestation, pollution, selective breeding, and monocropping. These life forms are part of us and our cultures; their loss will impoverish both the Earth and the human.

So ominous is this threat that some believe, as does Dr. David

Suzuki as quoted recently by Barry Peterson in the *Vancouver Sun* "that humankind has already crossed the point of no return in the planetary disaster its behaviour is causing."

Thomas Merton, a monastic theologian, and the most widely read spiritual writer of all times points out that we live in a state of alienation and confusion today:

"The curious state of alienation and confusion of man in modern society is perhaps more bearable because it is lived in common, with a multitude of distractions and escapes—and also with opportunities for fruitful action and genuine Christian self-forgetfulness. But underlying all life is the ground of doubt and self-questioning which sooner or later must

bonding and communion with every creature in the universe.

We live in a universe which is a complicated web of interdependent relationships. The quantity of an atom is the entire universe since it affects every atom in the universe, and every atom affects it. John Muir, the great naturalist, said that when we break a twig, we affect the most distant star. We can't become our true self without every other creature. If we don't have an human-earth relationship, as is mostly the case, we are doomed to a continuation of a life of alienation and "existential dread".

So then the question arises: Are we confirmed in the "fact that humankind has already crossed the point of no return in the planetary



bring us face to face with the ultimate meaning of our life. This self-questioning can never be without a certain existential "dread"—a sense of insecurity, of being lost, of exile, of sin. A sense that one has somehow been untrue not so much to abstract moral or social norms but to one's own inmost truth."

Our "inmost truth" is our true self that sleeps within us waiting to be awakened by the Spirit. Transformation of unconsciousness is that movement from our false exterior self from which we operate most of the time—to the discovery of our deep true self, our inmost truth. It is important to realize that we can never arrive at this true self without a deep

disaster its behaviour is causing"? Definitely not!

We live at a time in the unfolding of the universe where there is strong indication of a cultural rebirth and hope. And although we may be in deep pathology and in an apparent crash situation, we can make the choice between "dread" and hope, and in choosing hope can do our part in bringing about a greater presence of the human community to the natural world so that they embrace one another in a mutually enhancing manner, so that they become a single sacred humanity.

And wasn't that one of our *Decisions for Action* statements in our recent diocesan synod when "We choose to become the kind of people who will

accept our responsibility to protect and foster the health of the Earth, acknowledging the human community and the natural world as a single sacred community. In doing this, let us be guided by the wisdom of those who are spiritually in contact with our earth (e.g. Native people) and encourage new models of community based on a relationship with the entire cosmos." (A.54)

If we wish to have a relationship with the "entire cosmos" we must embrace a cosmology (a story that explains where we have come from and where we are going) that will give us adequate guidance. Hence the importance of the Universe Story.

A Cosmology and Spirituality for a New Millennium was the title for a recent lecture/workshop held recently in Victoria. It was an important conference and an inspiring one with a surprisingly big turnout. This conference, facilitated by Dr. Brian Swimme, a gravitational physicist and cosmologist from the California Institute of Integral Studies, took place at St. Andrew's High School Hall, Victoria, in August 1994.



Dr. Swimme, called a "mathematical mystic" brought to us a sense of awe as he lectured on the vast mystery of the cosmos. He is a scientific storyteller of the universe's unfolding, from the "primordial flaring forth" 15 billions years ago to the emergence of cosmogenesis (the awareness "that the universe is not just a big place, but a process, a cosmic event that's going somewhere") in our own time. As a scientist he sees the universe as a wondrous mystery, unfolding the presence of God in each moment of its emergence.

Our own bishop, Remi J. De Roo, introduced Brian and stressed the importance of science and religion working hand in hand. "Science needs religion, and religion needs science" he stated. Indeed, the event was sponsored by the *Centre for Studies in Religion and Science* of the University of Victoria and by the *New Perspectives Forestry Society*.

Parts two and three of this article will explore the "Universe Story" and especially the discovery of cosmogenesis which Dr. Swimme and Dr. Barry consider the most important scientific discovery of all times.

Then the question: what spiritual practice should accompany this vision of the universe. The answer, I think, is the practice of meditation, a type of meditation that is practised in the core of the soul rather than merely on the surface of the spirit. Meditation—or a similar and truly contemplative practice—becomes an absolute ethical imperative, a new categorical imperative, if we are not to merely siphon off past humanity's struggles.

Father Charles Brandt is a hermit Benedictine monk who lives in Black Creek on the Oyster River. On January 26 – 28, 1996, he will be facilitating a contemplative retreat, "Spirituality of the Environment" at Queenswood House of Studies, Victoria.

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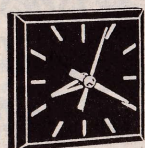
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