The Divine Dynamism: Being and Becoming

By Gail Worcelo, SGM

When you step into my office you see two images hanging on the wall, and at first glance they may seem unrelated. I keep them on my wall as a reminder that the Divine dynamism moves in two directions simultaneously, as eternal Being and ecstatic Becoming.

In the icon on the left, there is St. Hildegard of Bingen, Benedictine nun, Doctor of the Church and mystic of the 12th century, writing about her vision of “a fiery light abiding at the center of herself.” That fiery light is God.

Pictured on the right is a photo of a supernova explosion, an image also witnessing to the light of the Divine, but this light is flaring forth in ecstatic unfolding.

The fact that these two images hang side-by-side on the wall of a Catholic monastery speaks to the influence of science on theology and faith in our 21st century.

If you look closely you will notice that the difference between the images is in the DIRECTION and MOMENTUM of the Light—in one the light abides inwardly, in the other it explodes outwardly.

The Divine dynamism moves in two directions simultaneously. If we follow one direction, it will take us back before the beginning of time, and if we follow the other it will carry us far into the distant future.

The great breakthrough in our current theological awareness, as a result of new scientific discoveries about our expanding universe, is that the Divine is found not only in the bliss of timeless, changeless, eternal Being, but also in the ecstatic urgency of evolutionary Becoming.

This is a huge breakthrough in our spiritual awareness with implications that cannot be underestimated. “The world must have a God,” wrote Teilhard de Chardin, “but our concept of God must be extended as the dimensions of our world are extended.”

Mystics, saints and spiritual seekers throughout the ages have sought illumination and communion with the Divine through the perennial paths of prayer and meditation. In relentlessly pursuing the question, Who Am I? many of these women and men discovered the Mystery of God in the depths of themselves and often spent the remainder of their lives abiding “alone with the Alone.”

This traditional path points beyond the world, beyond time and space toward the Ground of Being. It is not a future-oriented path, nor is it a time-oriented one, because it traverses a terrain that is beyond time.

Evolutionary spirituality calls us to participate in the deeper processes at work in the unfolding of culture and cosmos.
Evolutionary spirituality calls us to participate in the deeper processes at work in the unfoldings of culture and cosmos. Transcendent states of peace and freedom, liberation and bliss can no longer be seen as gifts of the spiritual life for the individual alone. The transformative effects of a life in God have to expand beyond the confines of any individual self. The experience of transcendence, in an evolutionary context, needs to point us forward—not upward, downward or inward.

Many of us who are seekers in this post-modern era, who love God with as much intensity and passion as our forebears, are waking up to a new dimension of life in God that points us not beyond time, but toward the future we need to create. In addition to the question, Who am I? we also ask, Why am I here?

We are coming to understand that the reason for being here is the evolution of this world, rather than a flight from it. By “world” I mean the manifest domain of time and space, both the interior and exterior realms—consciousness, culture and cosmos.

Salvation is no longer found in the promises of a heavenly Jerusalem, in aiming for the world beyond or even in achieving a permanent state of inner peace, but in fully embracing this world and all the potential contained within it.

The Divine dynamism is calling us toward the next big step we need to take in the world by fully embracing that outrageous potential to Become, which from moment to moment emerges from the deepest Ground of Being Itself.

Using Our Theological Imaginations

Perhaps we can be a bit playful here and use our theological imaginations to reflect on what it must have been like before the universe was created. What was God up to? If we think about it, actually, No-thing! What could be more still and peaceful than the empty, timeless, unmanifest, eternal Ground of Being?

So why did Some-thing come from No-thing? If the impulse of the Ground of Being is to BE, why did it Become? We could only surmise that somewhere deep within the unmanifest domain of God, a boundless potentiality was hovering on the edges of eternity.

Another way of saying this is that even in the absolute No-thingness prior to the Big Bang, the potential for becoming was already there. We can only comprehend the moment of the breaking of the perfect symmetry of the void, but suddenly, somehow from the deepest dimension of BEING itself there emerged an overwhelming urge to BECOME.

Through the gift of evolutionary science we can now behold just how far this miraculous explosion of Becoming has brought us in the 13.8 billion years since that initial burst.

This dimension of Divinity as emergent Becoming which has recently come into our awareness calls for an adjustment in our God-Space.

The God of today can no longer be seen as external to the world, as above or simply beyond it. God expresses God’s self at the heart of the universe and emerges with it. As Teilhard de Chardin said, “God is not conceivable other than being confluent with the process of cosmogenesis.”

But what does this mean? Does God become richer, more complete, more perfect through the process of universe unfolding? Is God being created in the process of evolution and if so, how can God be the creator at the same time? Is the Self of God found in the self-emptying of God? Is God’s fate, as Karl Rahner suggests, “in and with the world?” These are questions for us to ponder, yet one thing we know for sure is that concepts of God—such as father or mother, or distant deity—are foreign and seem misplaced in an omni-centric evolutionary universe. Scientists tell us that the center of the universe and its birthplace, are, in fact, everywhere at once.

This means there is no “outside” that influences or brings forth creation. Scientists have put forth the notion of an underlying, supporting and empower-
ing “Field,” in the language of a Quantum or Zero Point Field. This omnipresent field they say is characterized by pure emptiness yet paradoxically, gives rise to everything that is.

Brian Swimme, in his book The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos, gives the name, “All Nourishing Abyss” to the Mystery at the base of Being. He describes it as an ‘empty fullness’, a ‘fecund nothingness’ and goes on to say that, “All Nourishing Abyss is acting ceaselessly throughout the universe. It is not possible to find any place in the universe that is outside this activity…an incessant foaming, a flashing flame, a shining-forth-from and a dissolving-back-into.”

The God of evolution reflects a dynamic God, deeply immersed in a love affair with creation.

The Deepening of Being in a World of Becoming

An evolutionary worldview offers at least two critical insights when it comes to consciousness. In using the word consciousness here I am referring to the deepening of Being.

First, consciousness or Being evolves. My mentor, the late Passionist priest and cultural historian Thomas Berry, was fond of saying, “Evolution is an internal as well as an external event, it is not just the outer world that is moving but the deep interior as well.”

The second insight is perhaps even more important. It is not just our personal Being that evolves but our shared Being, or collective interior, as well. Teilhard gave this a name, calling it the “noosphere,” and indicating it to be the next staging ground for evolution’s advance.

Evolutionary consciousness, or the deepening of Being from a Christian perspective, means seeing the incarnation of Christ in new, more rich, complex and intense manifestations.

In our time, Christ begins to awaken within the collective in an inter-Christic expression.

“Inter-Christic” means Christ is between us. As we begin to meet each other beyond the boundaries of the separate sense of self, a new enlightened space opens up between us, bringing with it the capacity for deeper relationality and love, transparency and depth.

In the inter-Christic field, Christ is reflected in the many, while the many manifest the ONE. Some of the qualities that describe what is present when people consciously place their attention on the Inter-Christic field are: Freshness, Fullness, Lightness of Being, Deep Integrity, Transparency, Mutuality, Radical Honesty, Joy and Continual Blossoming.

The language of science—holons, morphogenic fields, quantum entanglement—gives insight into this new dimension of Christic awakening, an exciting emergence located at the farthest edge of our lives in Christ.

I am reminded of the Gospel passage in Mark where Jesus bids the apostles: “Come, let us cross over to the other side.” The evolutionary Christ calls us to cross over into deeper and more profound levels of love, wholeness and Being. We need each other now to make the advance; the singular journey is no longer sufficient. Let us cross over together and embrace that outrageous potential to Become, which from moment to moment emerges from the deepest Ground of Being Itself.

5“Bright Wings” by Mary Southard, CSJ www.marysouthardart.org Courtesy of www.ministryofthehearts.org Congregation of St. Joseph

Gail Worcelo, SGM co-founded the Green Mountain Monastery in Greensboro, VT with Bernadette Bostwick and the late Thomas Berry. Its mission is: At the Heart of the Universe—in the Heart of God—Ever Evolving Toward the Fullness of Love.
We are standing by a small stream that flows through the meeting of two hillsides at the base of a gentle valley close to the center of the lands we call Genesis Farm. It is early dawn, Easter Sunday. A young woman, mingling water from the stream with waters from other streams, rivers, lakes and holy wells we have collected for special ceremonies, will carry this bowl of water for our ritual. She has also been working for several weeks on a paper we are preparing to articulate the rights of rivers to exist in their own integrity. Building on the insights of cultural historian Thomas Berry on the origin and nature of rights, this paper is about the Delaware River, in whose watershed both the stream and this small early morning group are approaching the mystery of life, death and resurrection.

The stream emerges out of natural springs in a rich wetland at a slightly higher elevation than where we are. It cascades over rocks and sediment down from a forested ridge and meanders across the meadow where we stand beneath a grove of trees. Over the seasons, the creek may dry completely, or in torrential rains it may overflow its boundaries and leave the meadows buried under a shallow lake.

Just a few weeks before this Easter Sunday morning a biology professor, who has brought classes of college students for weekend study sessions, approached me with a reminder that he would be sending me the results of the water studies his students had conducted on the stream.

“I want to tell you that this is the most pristine water I have ever observed,” he said. “It is so pure that I found organisms living in it that I have never before observed.”

His comments rang like inner gongs through my bones.

This stream and the underground network of springs on this land are a rare treasure. They bubble up from deep aquifers of virgin waters below the surface. Rising through fissures in the limestone bedrock they still emerge gratuitously toward the waiting streambed, then run down through this little valley before dispersing into a vast wetland. Eventually the water makes its way into streams flowing under a nearby county road before tumbling down into the Paulinskill River, herself flowing toward her meeting with the greater Delaware River.

It is the ancient Delaware River that is under siege. The entire river basin awaits the threat of being crisscrossed by gas pipes and grossly enlarged electric power lines, the plans for which were conceived in stealth over years of covert strategic planning.

To this desecrating end, the pristine, gurgling springs of utterly pure, life-giving waters are destined. And we, who hold some sort of paper title to this land, stand with our arms receiving the gift in one hand and implicated in its fate in the other.

Carrying the bowl of sacred water to the top of the hillside, the group sprinkles it over four ceremonial spaces dedicated to the four sources of wisdom from which we draw as we face into the anguish and profound uncertainties of...
These times. Described by Thomas Berry in his seminal book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, these wisdoms are contained in the great human legacies of indigenous people; the wisdom of women; the wisdom of the diverse religions of the classical historical age; and from radical new revelations discovered by scientists into the origin and evolution of a single, ever expanding universe: one with itself both physically and spiritually. Our small group has gathered once again to express our longings to embed ourselves in the mystery of this revelation.

We are groping to make our way into a vast new dimension of meaning. It has been called “deep time” by Teilhard de Chardin, and the phrase is being echoed by countless people caught in the same awesome awareness of the depth, vastness and closeness of the universe which is “bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.”

We are trying to plumb a new meaning of our own identities as individual persons, while carrying a collective past shared by every inch of bedrock, every awakening microbe in the early spring soils, and every ton of water rising as sap in the great surrounding trees coming to bud. We are gathered to reconnect ourselves with a greater self, which is the entire planet and cosmos.

This new identity, Berry suggests, is a revelation which can provide the spiritual and psychological energy for the task before us. But more specifically, we are trying to reconstruct ourselves with all the community of countless living beings who are awake this Easter morning on this particular landscape in the greater structure of the Appalachian ridge framing our western horizon. We stand on bedrock, created by the life, death and resurrection of billions of shallow sea organisms whose skeletons infuse the vast terrain of the great limestone valley whose soils sustain all members of the community here. All of us together are circling Sun moving into the shifting seasonal mystery of life, death and resurrection.

We are reinventing faith and we are reinventing prayer.

My reflections are derived almost in their entirety from the writings and insights of cultural historian and author, Thomas Berry, who was steeped in the Catholic tradition and a vowed member of a religious order. Because of this, he grappled with the tensions between the scientific story of an evolutionary Universe and the traditional salvation history motif of the Christian story emerging as it does from the weave of an early origin story explaining how things came to be and why they are the way they are.

A very difficult legacy of this early worldview was the sense that only the human species was endowed with spirit as well as a spiritual destiny, only to be realized in a spiritual realm beyond Earth. Thus nature, lacking soul, had no meaning apart from what humans gave to it. This worldview was further limited by the appearance of things as discrete, separate, material, soulless objects existing in the landscape outside our bodies. The implications of these perceptions over millennia have embedded themselves in powerful human institutions, which in more recent times contribute to the extreme assault on the life systems of the planet, even to destroying the conditions for life as we know it to survive.

Thus the fate of the stream which brings to the light of day its life-bear-

We are gathered to reconnect ourselves with a greater self, which is the entire planet and cosmos.

A stream along Genesis Farm

This new identity... is a revelation which can provide the spiritual and psychological energy for the task before us.
our gestures and movements with the desire and the intention to align ourselves with the greater movement of life, to try more earnestly in word and deed to place ourselves in the service of life.

And so emerges a greater resolve to resist the outbreak of the fracking scourge; the horrendous devastation of the tar sands; and the obscene attempt to own, re-engineer and patent the memory of living organisms. All these, in addition to the relentless waves of injustices humans continue to do to other humans.

Likewise, as we offer beautiful water, bee pollen and cornmeal to the communities of life with whom we share this valley and its hillside, we resolve to create and expand our gardens of open-pollinated vegetables, fruits, grains, herbs and flowers, cultivated and wild. We dream new visions of welcoming others into this ancient and ever-emerging dream.

The following phrases, like mantras repeated over and over again, keep me grounded in the lands of Genesis Farm. I no longer know how to speak of faith or spirituality apart from engaging wholeheartedly in the study of what Thomas referred to as the primary revelation of God, the primary Scripture. And to love this revelation is to love the Mystery out of which it comes and heed the call to love and protect everything in the web of relationships, which is the whole.

In the light of these statements it is proposed that the Great Work of our time is to:

Reinvent the human at the species level,
within the community of life systems,
in a time-developmental context, with critical reflection,
by means of story and shared dream experience.

In the twentieth century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth.

The desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human.

All human institutions, programs and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.

Sources

Miriam MacGillis, a Dominican Sister of Caldwell, NJ, co-founded Genesis Farm in 1980 with the sponsorship of her congregation. The work of Genesis Farm is rooted in the writings of Thomas Berry and has been a presence in the local Ridge and Valley Bioregion, evolving ecological initiatives in agriculture, spirituality, economics, education, land conservancy and energy.
Mysticism & The Social Brain

By Carol Lee Flinders, PhD

When radio interviewers ask Jane Goodall what she thinks her greatest life accomplishment is, she answers unhesitatingly:

“I blurred the line!”

The line Goodall blurred is the one people keep trying to draw between ourselves and other animals. Animals are so lovely, she says, so talented and intelligent... especially chimpanzees! Why wouldn't we want to be related?

Blurring such lines is a central preoccupation of the proponents of the new cosmology, storytellers par excellence, whose account of the Universe Story starts with the Big Bang and culminates on Planet Earth, with life pressing out into every imaginable environment, taking every conceivable form. That narrative has certainly affected my own work. For decades I have been studying the lives and writings of mystics, but now I find myself asking a different kind of question: What kind of an organism, I wonder, is the mystic? What sort of a line separates them from the rest of us, and should we be trying to blur it?

Mystics, of course, don’t constitute a distinct species. Homo sapiens sapiens like the rest of us, they have popped up all over the place for as long as we can remember. Etty Hillesum was still utterly human—a cosmopolitan intellectual with a complicated love life—when she wrote, just a few months before her death at Auschwitz, “You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God!”

They don’t make up a species, but mystics do seem to constitute a distinct tribe of some kind. What is it with these people? Why do they all sound so much alike? What has happened to them?

I’m inclined at present to believe that, as many of them insist, the capacity for mystical experience is something all human beings share—a germ, in effect, or a latency, which springs to life when the environment allows it to, working such profound changes in the individual that they seem to have crossed a certain extraordinary threshold. Perhaps the young science of epigenetics will one day shed light on this possibility.

Meanwhile, a vibrant cross-disciplinary conversation among neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists, endocrinologists and others is revolutionizing our understanding of even ordinary “baseline” human beings. I find one strand of that conversation especially intriguing.

Consensus is solid now: the human brain is a social organ. One could say much the same thing of all mammals, but the social brain really took off when human beings decided to live in groups of increasing size. The larger the group, the more complex were the interactions, requiring more and more brain circuitry. As brains got bigger, so did heads, until finally they could no longer squeeze through the birth canal. Nature’s alternative plan would have far-reaching consequences: babies would come into the world long before their brains were fully mature. The key to their survival over the ensuing years was, and is, a tremendously powerful bond between infant and mother. The
intense, adoring mutual gaze of infant and mother is foundational to mirroring systems that let us feel the emotions of others almost as powerfully as our own; as toddlers, we develop a “theory of mind” that helps us read the thoughts of others as well, and we work these capacities relentlessly for the rest of our lives.

Neuroscientists can distinguish now between areas of the brain that come into play when we attend to a task and those that light up when we ruminate on all things relational. “Social thinking,” they tell us, is the default—the gaudy, moving wallpaper of our minds. The social brain quiets down long enough for us to compose a poem or a grocery list, but seconds later it’s back, plotting and scheming, reconstructing one conversation and rehearsing another, seizing up in anger and falling apart in fear. It never stops. Its job has been to never stop because it is always getting us ready for the next crucial encounter. Arguably, these hyper-active social brains have gotten us to where we are.

Enter the mystic, suggesting first that where we are might actually not be where we’d like to be, and second that, evolutionary pressures notwithstanding, we can, in fact, re-engineer the workings of the social brain. Through prayer, meditation and spiritual disciplines we can slow down the stream of thoughts, purify it and, most importantly, dis-identify with it. When we do, they tell us, another extraordinarily different version of “I” is experienced.

Could the intense attunement to one another with which evolution has equipped us be the neurological substrate of that “germ” or latency for unitive consciousness I mentioned above? We developed that sensitivity primarily to help us navigate the turbulent waters of relationships to our personal advantage. But what if we could somehow separate the sensitivity from the selfishness? The existence of mystics suggests that we can. As to the “somehow,” their stories suggest it has to do with contemplative practice.

Mystics don’t run away from life, but they do take flight from certain aspects of themselves and of life as it is generally lived. Across the last two and a half years of her life, Etty Hillesum did just this, pulling together a set of disciplines that gradually released her from the tyranny of her own thoughts.

When she felt the first motions of a longing that surpassed her desire to be a great novelist or a great lover, Etty Hillesum fought shy of describing it in religious language. “I don’t want to be anything special,” she wrote. “I only want to try to be true to that in me which seeks to fulfill its promise.” Eighteen months later, as the noose of Nazi occupation tightened around her people, she could nonetheless see that promise unfolding:

I don’t have to... tinker with my life, for an organic process is at work. Something in me is growing, and every time I look inside, something fresh has appeared, and all I have to do is accept it.

Etty filled her journal with glimpses of that organic process, and in particular of the way her contemplative practice allowed her to tap into almost limitless love. Reading the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians one evening, she finds that like a divining rod it has touched the deepest part of her, “causing hidden sources to spring up suddenly within me.” She drops to her knees, “and all my released love coursed through me again, purged of desire, envy, spite....”

\[\text{I only want to try to be true to that in me which seeks to fulfill its promise.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}Etty Hillesum, \textit{Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 640.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}Epigenetics: changes in the expression of genes without altering the DNA sequence, which can be brought about by such factors as environmental or personal experiences.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}For an excellent overview of this subject, see \textit{Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect}, by Matthew D. Lieberman (Crown, 2013).}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}Hillesum 154.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5}Hillesum 359.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{6}Hillesum 256.}\]

Carol Lee Flinders is the author of \textit{Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics} and most recently \textit{Enduring Lives: Portraits of Women and Faith in Action}. She teaches Mysticism and the New Story at the Sophia Center at Holy Names University in Oakland, CA.
**Living Out of a New World View**

*Interview with Alexandra Kovats, CSJP by Rita Hemmer-Kowats*

**IPJC:** How did you come to a new insight and understanding of a new world view?

**Alexandra:** While studying with Matt Fox at Mundelein College in the early eighties, I was gifted by encounters with Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. A presentation by Berry shifted something inside of me—a recognition of truth around three principles of cosmology: differentiation, subjectivity or interiority, and communion. This truth led me to further studies.

**IPJC:** How has faith, informed by science and cosmology, influenced you?

**Alexandra:** I view faith and science together, just as they were always viewed in theological discourse prior to the Enlightenment. It is only in the last few decades that they have been reconnected. Cosmology and quantum science are helping us reclaim the natural law approach to theology, which I think is very important. The new cosmology and mystic consciousness share similar outcomes, in spite of using different methodologies. An example of this is the reality of interconnectedness. Science says that everything is connected with everything else. Mystics “know” this interconnectedness as they experience the Divine in all.

**IPJC:** What does it mean to live an evolutionary world view and new consciousness?

**Alexandra:** It means to live with an awareness that everything is connected. Private acts don’t exist. Our actions, even our thoughts, affect all reality. From an evolutionary perspective, we recognize that God continues to create and co-create with us. I am reminded of the teaching of the Indwelling Trinity from the past, the concept that God is always with us. Along the way we started to pray to a God that is out there, forgetting the intimacy of an Indwelling God. All of creation is enspirited… not just humans. The Incarnation is the great cosmological feast.

**IPJC:** How do you understand our own Catholic Christian tradition or theology in light of the new insights and discoveries?

**Alexandra:** I now read theology from the perspective of the three cosmological principles: differentiation, subjectivity and communion. Everything in our creative Universe is differentiated one from another. God loves diversity. All of creation has an inner dynamism which we are called upon to develop in ourselves and evoke in others. We are called to live communion.

Christology needs to look at the resurrected Jesus and how he has affected all of creation as the Cosmic Christ. We need to let the consciousness of Jesus inform our consciousness.

**IPJC:** How have new insights and discoveries in science and cosmology influenced and transformed your experience or understanding of the Scriptures and sacramental life?

**Alexandra:** We need to study Scripture as a whole web of life, paying attention to how natural law calls us to love every aspect of creation as we love ourselves.

The new cosmology is inviting me to a more expansive relation-

> *Continued on page 11*
At the moment of awakening, all the great mystics of the world agree: Ultimate Reality, by whatever name it might be called, is One. In the Realization of Ultimate Reality, all is One, and we are One with it all. Included in the Realization is the conviction that we are exactly where we are meant to be, we are doing exactly what we are meant to be doing, we are with exactly the people we are meant to be with, and we are exactly the person we are meant to be. The awakening to Ultimate Reality transcends particular conditions and beliefs.

Spirituality & Kabbalah

Spirituality is always inclusive—spiritual awareness contains everything, yet is not limited by any of that which it contains. Spiritual awareness can even embrace beliefs in exclusivity, even though the opposite cannot be true. Our normal experience is that each of us is a separate being, but in our spiritual awakening we know ourselves to be always connected and interdependent upon each other and all life.

Every great religious tradition of humankind has spiritual teachings, often referred to as the mystical side of those traditions. In Judaism, the Kabbalah represents the heart of Jewish mysticism. The word Kabbalah literally means “that which is received,” and is often translated as “tradition.” Kabbalah is the continuing evolution of Jewish spirituality, reflecting the evolution of the immediacy of revelation.

While Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis through Deuteronomy—are viewed through kabbalistic eyes, the first actual kabbalistic text comes to us from the early centuries of the Common Era. In the relatively brief text of the Sefer Yetzirah, the “Book of Formation,” the basics of kabbalistic tradition are defined. Kabbalah specifically relates to the evolving understanding of the 32 Paths of Wisdom represented by the 10 levels of the Tree of Life and the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet.

The Tree of Life, for centuries represented as ten concentric circles, and since the 11th century represented in a more human form, describes the nature of all of reality, and in particular reflects the stages through which an absolutely inclusive Consciousness moves from absolute non-duality to manifest, finally, as the material world we experience. There are some traditions that omit the top level and add another to fill the void. In any case, there are always ten levels represented on the Tree. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, according to the Kabbalah, illustrates a particular way that One Energy manifests in the world of diversity, and carries a particular numerical value. Popularly, the ten levels of the Tree are represented as circles connected by 22 paths, each representing the energy of a Hebrew letter.

Perhaps you can imagine how a kabbalistic approach to a particular text would find meanings far deeper than the literal translations of the words. The energy dance of the letters creates a field of interpretations that quickly transcend any particular place and time. Through kabbalistic eyes, sacred text is always evolving.

The Central Pillar of Identity

Of particular significance in this current discussion is the central pillar of the Tree that presents a way of identifying the major levels of our own identity: the places from which we meet the world. At the top of the Tree, the “I” is absolutely inclusive: the One Being opens its I. At the bottom of the Tree, our particular “I” is absolutely exclusive, and we are identified with a specific condition in the world. At the top of the Tree, the Identity is absolutely free; at the bottom of the Tree, the identity is absolutely trapped.

Since the meditative Kabbalah focuses on personal experience, the central pillar provides ways of examining the nature of those experiences—the degree to which they are inclusive or exclusive, the degree to which we experience ourselves separated or connected to self, to other and to our world.

The major stages of identity—the experience of self, as one moves upward on the central pillar of the Tree of Life, include transcending identifi-
Who We Are Makes All the Difference

The One Energy, expressing through various levels of inclusivity and exclusivity, is a singular, Cosmic Energy. The Kabbalah understands this Energy as Consciousness. At its most inclusive, it is Consciousness without contents; at its most exclusive, it is Consciousness identified with a particular content.

This Energy, or Consciousness, awakens through us in ways corresponding to the levels of identity described by explorers of Consciousness of all traditions. There are no major areas of disagreement here, just different maps of a common process. And how could this not be so, since each is simply a different approach to the same territory?

What is crucial to the survival of our species and our planet, however, is the need for us all to begin to operate on more inclusive levels of consciousness. Only then will we more naturally operate more compassionately for the preservation of person and planet. No matter our spiritual path, we are each called upon to awaken more fully to the challenge we have created for ourselves.

We recognize that today, it is essential for us to re-visit the Jesus story, our central story of faith, in light of the larger, cosmic story. During three hundred years of amnesia about its relationship with science, the Church has forgotten that we are a part of the Universe story; the Earth story. This separation has resulted in missed opportunities for dialogue. The new cosmology calls the Church to cultivate dialogue that connects it to the Universe and let go of a stance of debate, which separates us, one from another.

"Interview" continued from page 9

It invites me to live consciously in these little and big ways:
- Eat low on the food chain by becoming mostly vegetarian
- Choose to lessen my carbon footprint, e.g. combine trips
- Pray: spend time out in creation as a way to gain wisdom
- Simplify by creative choices
- Recycle and compost
- Advocate with legislators, e.g. coal trains coming through Washington State

IPJC: Why is it important for our church, and for us as people of faith, to evolve in our understanding and integration of science and faith in our lives and practice of faith?

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Alexandra: First, it is our original tradition. The last three hundred years ignored science, and both science and religion were diminished as a result. Second, young people are right there now, and if we don't get on board, we will lose them.

We need to move from separateness to oneness. I have made a habit of reflection, which encourages this shift. Reflecting on my behaviors that separate, and then making changes that connect with the Universe, is a process that has become an integral part of my mystic consciousness.

Alexandra: We need to move from separateness to oneness. I have made a habit of reflection, which encourages this shift. Reflecting on my behaviors that separate, and then making changes that connect with the Universe, is a process that has become an integral part of my mystic consciousness.
While viewing *Gravity* recently, I couldn’t help but think that astronaut Ryan Stone’s untethered hurtling through space is an apt metaphor for life that many can identify with. We are living during a paradigm shift—much of it due to scientific understandings and discoveries that rocket us daily into a world we once considered science fiction. Now, that fiction is fact. Headlines ask, “Are We Alone in the Universe?” Data from the Kepler space-telescope suggests “that about 22 percent of stars like our sun have planets in the habitable zone.”¹ The nearest such planet may be some 12 light-years distant. Not as close as Kansas, but close in astronomical terms. The possibility gives us pause. It may even blow our minds. If life exists on other planets, what does it do to our theology? Our redemption through Jesus? Will there be beings like us? All pertinent questions.

A huge gap between scientific understanding and the language of faith has developed as science has made unthinkable discoveries and religion has tried to hold on to traditional beliefs. The language of theological discourse can seem archaic and may not always meet people where they live. Too often our prayers in formal, communal worship keep God at a distance. But isn’t God as close as our very breath?

Heaven used to be “up.” We now know that space is infinite, and even expanding. Einstein’s theory of relativity—that matter and energy are converting into each other—has been augmented by new understanding that all matter may be energy! Our culture needs a spiritual narrative that grounds us in the context in which we now live. That narrative can be found in evolution—specifically the “new story” of the Big Bang as the origin of the Universe. The story of creation in *Genesis* has symbolic meaning in explaining how we got here. While some take that Scripture literally, for most of us, knowing our Earth has been evolving for almost 14 billion years, a fact verified by science, is the narrative that has captured our imaginations. It fills us with amazement—amazement that Judy Cannato called “radical”—and awe that is the beginning of authentic worship.

Mind-blowing though it may be, we are made of stardust. Literally. Cannato reminds us:

*The water in your body contains primordial hydrogen formed in the first seconds of the Big Bang. The carbon atoms that form you came together as a result of the explosion of a supernova. The concentration of salt in your body matches the concentration of salt in the ancient seas…. And in your mother’s womb your tiny body repeated the whole process of multicellular life on Earth, beginning as a single cell and then developing greater and greater complexity.*²
What does this understanding of our origins do to our concepts and images of God? Cannato reminds us that while evolution “asserts that we are part of a magnificent whole that consists of a vast web of relationships,” one that takes us to the edge of Mystery, “only Mystery can provide a ‘why’ and point us toward our purpose and meaning.” Perhaps Mystery is one of the best names for God, because it neither anthropomorphizes God into some giant, powerful humanoid nor limits our growing understanding. Some say “God” is more verb than noun—a concept that jibes with process theology and the reality of an ever-expanding universe.

Delio asserts “for evolution to advance to the next level of shared humanity and deepened consciousness, religions must unify on the level of love and consciousness of an ultimate ground.” We see signs of this in the increase of interreligious dialogue; international cooperation in the eco-justice network; and the emerging awareness of a shared, new consciousness “based on the values we hold as a species.” Even the Space Station is international! This is an evolving awareness of God’s love permeating all of creation. As scientists marvel at the intricacies and patterns of quantum physics, they are starting to sound like mystics. As we contemplate the amazing images from NASA’s Hubble telescope, we experience both awe and humility.

Jesuit scientist and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin “intuitively knew in the mid-twentieth century that if the church did not adopt evolution as the new Genesis story human life and culture would dissipate.” The good news is that there are signs that the church is becoming not only more open to science, but ever more open to the relief of suffering in this life. Catherine of Siena may have said it best: “All the way to heaven is heaven.” We go with each other. We go to God.

Note: Special thanks to Peter O. Ways for his contribution to this article.

3. Ibid.
5. Delio 175.

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Contemplation 101*

If you feel some resistance to the idea of meditating, you’re not alone. In our busy, on-the-go lives, finding time for anything extra—like a special time for prayer—can seem next to impossible. But, the benefits of quiet time for thoughtful reflection can be huge. It’s worth exploring a spiritual practice that helps us become better friends with God by centering our minds and hearts.

*Gretchen’s guidelines for Contemplation 101 can be found online at www.ipjc.org (AMOS)

Resources

Books
Berry, Thomas. Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community. 2006.
Berry, Thomas. The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth. 2009.
Cannato, Judy. Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life. 2010.
Haught, John F. Christianity and Science: Toward a Theology of Nature. 2007.

Films
The Awakening Universe. A journey through time from the birth of the universe to the development of human consciousness (15 min) awakeninguniverse.com
Swimme, Brian & Mary Evelyn Tucker. Journey of the Universe. The epic story of Cosmic, Earth and Human Transformation (56 min) journeyoftheuniverse.org

Note: All resources available at IPJC
Young Adult Justice Cafés

Spirituality • Justice • Community

We are over 30 Justice Cafés and growing!

New sites include:

Brooklyn, NY Mobile, AL
Buffalo, NY Hartford, CT
Gresham, OR Bellevue/Kirkland, WA
Portland, OR Wenatchee, WA

A post from our Muslim & Christian Café in Nigeria on the topic of gender:

It’s a matter of attitude, behavior and context. Often people live side-by-side for decades without differences but then conflict pushes them to see each other as enemies instead of neighbors or friends. Therefore, all we require is the transformation of our perceptions of identity; doing away with creating imaginary borders of religion, ethnicity, education, class, age, nationality, race and gender. We need to redefine and rehumanize ourselves and transform the way we identify ourselves in relation to others by acknowledging the differences we have and affirming our commonalities and respecting each other.

~Austine Jang

Justice Circles

30 leaders from rural communities on the Caribbean Coast gathered to address issues of tropical disease exacerbated by climate change. In concert with health professionals, they developed and promulgated health strategies and programs.

Justice Café in Houston, TX

Just Video Contest

The IPJC Just Video Contest is now in its 5th year!

If you know high school juniors or seniors, please encourage them to submit a video. Check out the official Just Video page at www.ipjc.org

Convocation Letters

We mailed our Women’s Convocation letters to Pope Francis.

He responded by sending his Apostolic Blessing and prayers for peace and joy for all!
Catholic Advocacy Day

Proclaim Justice & Life for All!
Friday, Feb 21
9:00am—3:00pm

We need your presence and voice on behalf of those living in poverty and on the margins.

Get on the bus!

There are 16 locations from Vancouver to Bellingham where you can catch the bus. Reserve your place today!

Register Online: ccsww.org/advocacy
Call: 206.328.5792

Donations

Thank you to all who have given generously to our Fall appeal!

You make our peace and justice ministry flourish!

Donations in honor of: Judy Byron, OP, Megan Welling
Donations in memory of: Marie Cain, Jackie Dean, Anne Heger, OP, Thomas Kessing, CSJP

Young Adult Interfaith Conference

Many Faiths, One Humanity: Unity in Diversity

Bringing young adults (20s and 30s) together from diverse backgrounds to build community, engage in dialogue, learn about one another’s faith traditions, and explore interfaith engagement in service and justice.

January 12th, 2014
1:30pm–6:00pm
St. Mark’s Cathedral
Seattle, WA 98102

If you’re in your 20s/30s and have a dream for our world, you do not want to miss this conference!

Reach out & invite young adults to attend!

Info/Registration—www.ipjc.org

Human Trafficking Awareness Day—January 11th

- New Prayer & Resources at ipjc.org
- Workshop at Church Council of Greater Seattle open to all! Jan 25, 9am-12pm
- Schedule a Jr. High webinar
- January marks our 6th year of Human Trafficking Vigils in the US—1st Sunday of the month!
- Join us on January 5th at Westlake Park in Seattle or another location, or start your own vigil—www.ipjc.org
Communal Contemplative Conversation

Gather a small group and invite them to read this issue of A Matter of Spirit, or perhaps a specific article, before the gathering. Begin with a simple music chant or quiet meditation.

Reader: Standing at the Gate of the New Year

Sacred Mystery
Waiting on the threshold
of this new year,
you open the gates
and beckon to me;
"Come! Come!
be not wary of what awaits you
as you enter the unknown terrain,
be not doubtful of your ability
to grow...

I set aside my fears, worries, concerns,
I open my life to mystery, to beauty,
to hospitality, to questions,
to the endless opportunity
of discovering you in my relationships,
and to all the silent wisps of wonder
that will draw me to your heart.
I welcome your unfailing Presence
and walk with hope into this new year.

—excerpt from Joyce Rupp, Out of the Ordinary

Communal Contemplation
Invite people into a time of communal contemplation; at least 15 minutes

Conversation

What is the invitation into mysticism and mystery that I experience in Mysticism & the Social Brain?

What images and language for God do I use and do I hear? How do these reflect an evolving theology and cosmology?

What intrigued or stretched me in reading The Divine Dynamism or Creation: Revelation of God?

What do I/we want to explore more fully from this issue of A Matter of Spirit? How might I/we seek companions for our walk into mystery and new consciousness?

Facilitator
Let’s re-enter into contemplative quiet to consider the call living in us.
After the quiet I will invite you to share a word or phrase of the call you hear.

"The universe itself is the primary sacred community."

—Thomas Berry