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Spiritual Direction and the New Cosmology • Saint Bernard of Clairvaux
Spirituality and Work • Survivors of Suicide • Walking in the Dark

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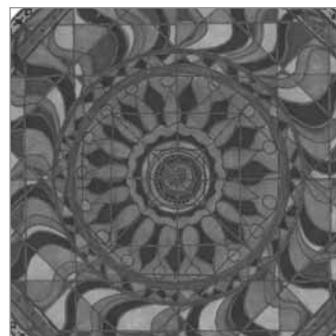
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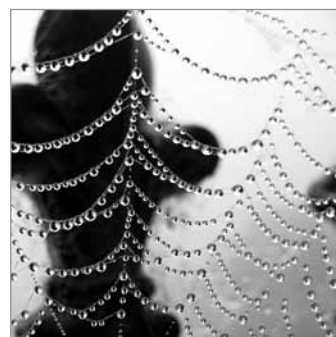
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Spiritual Direction and the New Cosmology

Terrence J. Moran, CSSR

What Does It Mean for Spiritual Direction to Come Home to the Cosmos?

The theme of the 2007 Spiritual Directors International Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, was “Coming Home to the Cosmos.” Many participants gasped with awe as keynote presenter Brian Swimme filled screen after screen with images of expansive galaxies and the intimacies of the atom. Those participants have returned home. The PowerPoint presentation is over. Their scribbled conference notes have been filed away for future reflection. But the question remains, what does it mean for spiritual direction to come home to the cosmos? What does it mean to be a spiritual director in a universe that began in a singular explosion of radiant energy 13.7 billion years ago? What does it mean to be a spiritual director in a world where the polar ice caps are melting? What does it mean to sit in a chair across the room from people and listen to their sacred stories while, even as we meet, our presence as humans on Earth is imperiling the existence of other species of life?

Thomas Berry, CP, Swimme’s mentor, friend, and a pioneer in making connections between the new cosmology and spiritual traditions, issues this stark and prophetic call: all human institutions, professions, programs, and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship (1–11). How does the ministry and service of spiritual direction respond to Berry’s challenge? Do the traditions and spiritual practices of spiritual direction inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship? How does *my* offering of spiritual direction inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship?

Recovering the Ecological Wisdom of Our Religious Traditions

An adequate answer to Berry’s question from the perspective of the world’s great religious traditions is beyond the scope of this article. Even the briefest attempt to consider the question draws us into the ambiguities and paradoxes of all spiritual traditions and practices of spiritual direction. Some would lay the blame for ecological devastation squarely at the door of the biblical traditions, as Lynn White does in the provocative article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” Yet the biblical traditions also contain lyrical celebrations of the natural world. They have given birth to people such as the late eighteenth-century Hassidic Rabbi Nachman, who prayed, “Master of the Universe ... may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass, among all growing things” (quoted in Gottlieb, 177), and Francis of Assisi, who planted wild flowers at the borders of the

plots of farms so that a little bit of God’s wildness would survive amid the human remaking of creation. The Wisdom literature of the Bible contains many evocative passages that celebrate the playful Wisdom of God dancing in creation. Elsewhere in the Bible the focus is placed on the mighty and extraordinary interventions of God in history such as the Exodus. The Wisdom literature complements this perspective by seeing God’s presence in “the structure

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of the world and the activity of the elements ... the alterations of the solstices and the changes of the seasons ... the natures of animals and the tempers of wild animals ... the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots” (Wis 7:17–20). Many of the great spiritual traditions of Asia, while maintaining the illusory nature of the material world, contain texts and stories that show nature as an instrument for spiritual enlightenment. The Buddha reached enlightenment not from his world-denying ascetical practices



but in a rush of insight on seeing the morning star. The indigenous traditions of many lands are a rich resource in this regard. For many groups of Native Americans, the natural world is itself the spiritual director, and the most profoundly transformative spiritual experience comes from the “vision quest,” in which the human person leaves behind her or his self-constructed defenses in order to engage the natural world in radical vulnerability (Galiardi, *Encountering Mystery*, 23–76).

Spiritual Direction and the Great Work

Spiritual directors rightly resist the suggestion that they should impose content on a spiritual direction relationship that does not arise from the spiritual directee. We try very hard not to bring our own agendas, even ecological ones, to the spiritual direction relationship. Illuminating in this regard is a story about the practice of renowned German psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichman. For a number of years Fromm-Reichman saw in therapy a young woman who suffered with a number of irrational fears. After three years, the woman gained a great deal of insight and made significant life changes. Three weeks after terminating the therapeutic relationship, the woman, who was Jewish, was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp. Can a spiritual direction relationship be authentic if it ignores the social context in which the spiritual direction relationship takes place? We must ask further, can a spiritual direction relationship be authentic if it ignores the cosmological context in which all relationship takes place? Is spiritual direction authentic if it takes places only *on* Earth and not consciously *in* Earth?

If a spiritual directee or a retreatant did not seem to be praying, a spiritual director would probably raise and address that question in a session or interview. A person living without conscious regard to her or his relationship with the natural world is living in the most profound state of alienation from something vitally essential to flourishing as a person. Should this not perhaps also be addressed? Similarly, if a spiritual directee gave evidence of being involved in an abusive relationship with another person, we would surely address this issue. But what if the person is engaging in ways of living that, in Berry’s words, “inhibit a mutually enhancing earth-human relationship”? Obviously we are exploring new ground for the ministry and service of spiritual direction. The introduction of

these considerations should be done with the same sensitivity, respect for the person, and regard for appropriate timing as would a conversation about any other challenging issue. But can spiritual directors be faithful to our part in the “great work” of our age by habitually ignoring the cosmological perspective in our spiritual direction sessions? Jewish philosopher Roger Gottlieb poignantly places the question this way: “Can communion wine really be the blood of Christ if it contains poisonous pesticide residues? Is the age-old Buddhist meditation practice of attending to the breath rendered suspect when we are breathing polluted air?” (19).

To attempt to place the blame for the current precarious state of Earth’s environment on religious traditions and their ambivalent attitudes toward the material world would be simplistic in the extreme. Indeed, significant elements in mainline religious traditions have responded to the discoveries of the new cosmology and to environmental concerns with an openness that is in stark contrast to the conflicts between theology and science that characterized the modern period. Undeniably, however, most traditions of spiritual guidance have until recently ignored the material world as a significant influence in the ministry and service of spiritual direction. Like classic schools of psychology, spiritual direction has typically confined its focus to the inner world of the person. We saw the world as the stage in which spiritual direction took place rather than as a participant in the relationship—as an intimate and inescapable companion in any human interaction. For example, retreat centers are often located in settings of great natural beauty, and retreatants are often encouraged to walk the grounds, to take in the view from the hillcrest, to contemplate on the riverbank. In doing so, how much time do we spend actually seeing what is before our eyes or under our feet, and how much time do we spend projecting our internal processes onto the environment?

Challenges of the New Cosmology for Spiritual Direction

The new cosmology invites us to ask some fundamental questions about the unexamined assumptions that lie beneath our ministry and service of spiritual direction. Who is the self that sits in a chair across from a spiritual director? Indeed, who is the self that sits in



the spiritual director's chair? Spiritual directors are very conscious that the "other" who sits before us is a mystery. As the spiritual direction relationship progresses, we will be privileged to witness the working of the Spirit in the inner life of this person. We will hear of their prayer, their thoughts, their feelings, their life stories, their relationships, perhaps their dreams. They will learn something of our inner world too, although we will be very careful not to let our "stuff" dominate or compromise the spiritual direction relationship. As we listen, we will also be conscious of the movements within ourselves and will share these movements with a supervisor or supervision group.

The new cosmology reveals a new level of relationship to us. The experience of my own self and the self of the spiritual directee, although true, is only partial. Indeed our experience is the result of a bias deep in Western cultures. As James Hillman, the Jungian psychologist, remarks: "Since the cut between self and natural world is arbitrary, we can make it at the skin or we can take it as far out as you like—to the deep oceans and distant stars" (quoted in Roszak, xix). The new cosmology opens up for us the truth to which our cultural biases have blinded us: our perception of our selves as starting at our skin and moving inward is a decision—and a largely inaccurate one. The stuff of which we are made finds its origins in distant stars. In every spiritual direction session, we are in intimate relationship with the trees outside the window. Our lives depend on the millions of ants aerating the soil beneath our feet. The sun is an active presence and participant in our spiritual direction sessions. As Brian Swimme loves to point out, our thinking itself is a solar event. The memories we share in spiritual direction, the words we form to express them, the way these words enter the consciousness of the spiritual director and are processed by her or his brain—all of this is possible because of the generous self-giving of the sun and is the manifestation of a solar process in ourselves.

Hillman continues, "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" (quoted in Roszak, xix). Every spiritual direction session is a cosmic event. It is the unfolding in time and space of a story that began 13.7 billion years ago when, in an inexpressible explosion of energy, the potential for everything that would ever exist came into being. The relationship between spiritual director and spiritual directee does not begin with the first tentative telephone call to set up an initial meeting. The relationship between spiritual director and spiritual directee, and with the chairs they sit in, and with the tree outside the window, and with the molecules of water exchanged with their breathing, and with the farthest galaxy—this intricate web of relationships began 13.7 billion years ago.

The new cosmology teaches us that spiritual direction must result not only in a deepening of the inner life or even in right relationships with other humans but also in harmonization with the environmental world. It is a journey not only inward to the depths of the self but also outward in expansive longing to the ever-receding limits of the cosmos. Spiritual direction is in service of right relationships on every level—a longing expressed in the biblical dream of *Shalom*—right and harmonious relationships within the person, between people, among peoples, with the entire cosmos, with the Holy.

The first call is for spiritual directors themselves to become "Earth literate." We need to be able to read with equal facility the sacred text of Earth as we do the sacred texts of our religious tradition. Spiritual directors typically immerse themselves in the vast literature of the human striving for God. But are we aware that the periodic table of elements, perhaps a vague memory from high school chemistry classes, with its tale of the progress from heavy to light elements, from simple to more complex, is a "story of the soul" as well? Look out the window

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“Sunburst” — Stacy Wills

of the room where you typically offer spiritual direction. Even better, walk outside the building. How much do you know about the land on which your office sits? Do you know what animals, trees, and plants are indigenous to the area? Do you know where your water comes from and to where your water drains? Are you alert to the changing of the seasons and to the cycles of the weather, and do you notice the effects these seem to have on you and your spiritual directees? Do you really mean what you say when, in the pleasantries that often begin a spiritual direction session, you identify a sunny spring day as “glorious” and a dark wintry day as “miserable”? How can we encourage our spiritual directees to embrace the holy darkness in their inner worlds yet still impute “misery” to

the darkness of the outer world?

Spiritual directors, having done their own “outer work” of consciously situating themselves in their environment, can invite their spiritual directees to access and process their own experiences of transcendence with the natural world. Early in a spiritual direction relationship, it is common to ask a spiritual directee to talk about his or her preferred styles and habitual practices of prayer. We often invite spiritual directees to return to favorite scripture passages or to explore the implications of unfamiliar ones. Do we ever ask our spiritual directees about the role the natural world plays in their spiritual practices? Widespread literacy is a relatively new phenomenon in human history. For the majority of history, humans have



engaged with the Divine without the mediation of sacred texts. Earth itself has evoked from the human a yearning for the sacred longer than has the sacred text of any religious tradition. Most people, when invited to reflect on their earliest experience of the sacred, will mention experiences of the transcendent evoked by nature long before they were exposed to formal religious education or sacred texts. Indeed, their later religious formation may well have taught them to ignore the significance of these experiences or judged them as inferior to later experiences approved by their religious tradition. British theologian and social activist Mary C. Grey lyrically describes the capacity of the sea, source of all life, to evoke an encounter with the Holy:

Perhaps of all the places where people congregate, the seashore is recognized as a place of delight, pleasure, adventure and a possible site of the experience of transcendence. It is a place where both child and adult experience freedom: in fact, both seem to move easily from solitude to community (ball-games and picnics), from play to wonder, and from weariness to a sense of rebirth and transformation in emerging, tossed and cleansed by turbulent waves. It is a place where—in a context of globalized frenzy—it is still possible to delight in simple pleasures. Where the child—briefly—does not demand expensive toys and the sophisticated adult can become a contemplative even for a day. (95)

The movement from solitude to community, from play to wonder, to transformation and contemplation—what rich material for spiritual direction can emerge from an encounter with the natural world! For good reason Thomas Merton would remark, “If you want to learn to pray, go to the sea and the sea will teach you everything.”

Spiritual directors might encourage spiritual directees to consciously adopt practices of attention to the natural world. Indeed, we might encourage them to adopt nature as spiritual director (Hutton, 248–251). We may think

we already have a relationship to the natural world—as we power walk with the earphones of an MP3 player imbedded in our heads. Usually, in our forays into the natural world, we just use it as the backdrop onto which we project our own inner world. We rush though nature as we process our inner worlds, as we engage with our hopes, anxieties, and regrets, all but unheeding of the world outside our heads. We need to do more than gaze at a gorgeous land or seascape as we sift through our inner worlds. We need to really encounter one square foot of earth, one tree, one patch of sky—to really encounter it and to see what is happening *there*, not just as a backdrop to what is happening *in us*.

Near my home in New Jersey (USA), the Passaic River passes through two towns, Millington and Summit. You can drive from Millington to Summit in about fifteen minutes. However, to travel from Millington to Summit

in a canoe on the Passaic River would take an entire day. Is there a deeper truth in the river’s mode of travel? The Passaic River experiences every inch of earth between Millington and Summit. The quickest way between two points may be a straight line, but perhaps it is not the holiest way. There are almost no straight lines in nature. When the Passaic River meets an obstacle, it does not bulldoze over it to obliterate it;

it moves to embrace it, to engage it, to transform and be transformed by it. There is a holy wisdom in the river’s way. The same wisdom is expressed in the classic Chinese text the *Tao Te Ching*, whose author, Lao-tzu, knew nothing of the new cosmology:

The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the Tao. In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don’t try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present. When you are content to be simply yourself and don’t compare or compete, everybody will respect you. (quoted in Mitchell, 8)

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Spiritual directors know that genuine, lasting transformation in a person's life does not proceed from motivations of shame or guilt. Rather, genuine transformation comes from discovering what we love, exploring what we love, and living into the implications of that love for all the dimensions of our life. Spiritual direction is not the place to gather statistics about the life span of discarded plastic bottles or the rate of extinction of species. Rather, spiritual direction is the place to relish the titanic sensation of wonder that overcomes us in gazing at the ocean, to recognize that experience as a movement of the Spirit, to explore what it would mean to live in such a way that the ocean and I will both flourish. How might my life look if I lived by the wondrous wisdom of the river?

Spiritual directors are increasingly being invited to engage issues raised by the new cosmology by spiritual directees themselves. Spiritual directors are accustomed to accompanying people through the process of integrating new life experiences that necessitate a new relationship with God. For example, many spiritual directors have attentively listened to many people whose early experiences of the Holy were influenced by a tradition of biblical fundamentalism. Their challenge is to help people hear the voice of the Spirit that continues to speak through a sacred text even though they no longer believe that the text was dictated word for word by God and therefore inerrant. In spiritual direction, people may experience disorientation when they try to integrate discoveries of the new cosmology with religious "truths" central to their faith traditions. Both spiritual directors and spiritual directees must recognize that our generation of humanity is the first to have access to a scientifically accurate story of the origins of the universe. This moment holds both exhilarating possibilities and heart-wrenching terrors. The new story of cosmic origins comes not from inspired sacred texts or from religious authority figures but from empirical observation. This new story, therefore, has enormous unifying possibilities. No longer can the central religious concern of our day be the competing and often contradictory claims of faith traditions. Rather, the central question of the age is how every religious tradition might integrate the awe-inspiring and truly sacred story of the universe's origin that comes from science. We are the first humans

to be graced by this blessed opportunity. We are also the first humans to struggle with the immensity of this question.

A Roman Catholic nun told me that she shared with a friend in an e-mail her concerns for her church on the day that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI. Her friend e-mailed her back with an attachment of one of the Hubble satellite photographs of those vast plumes of cosmic gases, the birthplace of stars, millions of light years in length. Referring to the photograph, her friend commented, "*This* is what Sophia, Holy Wisdom, was doing today." How small, how trivial, the concerns of religious polity seem when placed against a cosmic horizon! And yet we live and relate in a world whose history has been marked by distinctions between Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shiite, religious and secular Judaism. A central challenge for some spiritual directees is how to continue to relate to the religious traditions that formed them when the insights of the new cosmology might seem to call into question the core beliefs of those traditions.

Elaine Prevallet, a Roman Catholic Sister of Loretto, offers two suggestions in this regard. Reflecting on the challenge the new cosmology offers to her Roman Catholic heritage, Prevallet often says, "I am very unwilling to kick away the ladder that has brought me to where I am today." Prevallet recognizes that it is because of, not in spite of, her formation in the Catholic spiritual tradition that she knows the longing for the sacred and the wideness of spirit that compels her to explore the spiritual meaning of the new cosmology. Prevallet also reflects that she is reluctant to engage an elitist form of spirituality that would completely separate her from the wider community of believers, both of the present and the past. She points out that people who believed, and indeed continue to believe, that Earth was created in six literal days have nonetheless been people of concrete practical compassion—have fed the hungry, advocated for justice, and made human history radiant with their goodness. We would be foolish to part company with them (14–19).

Margaret Galiardi, OP, a writer and speaker who engages the interface between spirituality and cosmology, reflects on the role spiritual direction has played in her own experience:



The role of the director in accompanying the directee as she or he turns fully into a new paradigm can be very important. I think of the well worn image of the trapeze artist—one has to let go before we can encounter the new. It can be frightening. I remember praying myself as I was in the midst of this transition, “I don’t know where you are leading me but please take care of me and keep me safe.” I often say that the spiritual life is about the making and breaking of our God images. God is merciful in not allowing us to cling to inadequate images of God’s self. The spiritual director stands on the road as a beacon of light and encouragement assuring that this is indeed a road to new life. It would be so sad were we to turn from this challenge. (Conversation with author)

Australian environmentalist John Seed has this insight on the role of psychology in the great work of our time:

It is obvious to me that the rain forests cannot be saved one at a time, nor can the planet be saved one issue at a time: without a profound revolution in human consciousness, all the rain forests will soon disappear. Psychologists in service to the Earth helping ecologists to gain deep understanding of how to facilitate profound change in the human heart and mind seems to be *the* key at this point. (Quoted in Roszak, 3)

Spiritual directors in service to Earth would also seem to be a key point. Sister of Mercy and environmentalist Constance Kozel wonders if spiritual directors, experienced practitioners of holy listening, can help people learn the listening skills necessary to attend to the cries of an imperiled Earth. Can spiritual direction be that capacious vessel that holds together in creative tension the spiritual wisdom of the great religious traditions and the dizzying discoveries of contemporary physics? Can spiritual directors be the midwives of this profound revolution in human consciousness?

Forming Spiritual Directors in the New Cosmology

Taking seriously our part in the great work of our time—the promoting of mutually enhancing human-

Earth relationships—has obvious implications for spiritual direction enrichment, formation, and training (EFT) programs. Do the content and processes of our programs show a conscious attention to the implications of the new universe story? This might require a radical renewal of our programs: not just to add a new cosmology video and stir but to make the new cosmology one of the lenses through which all the program contents and processes are periodically evaluated. The new cosmology is not just another workshop theme. As Berry reminds us, the universe story is the context for all other contexts. It is a mode of presence of the Divine that is older than the oldest of our religious traditions. It beckons us to uncover a primordial unity at the heart of reality that is deeper than the histories and teachings that distinguish and divide various faith traditions.

When staff and participants in our EFT programs gather for the first time, we rightly spend time getting to know one another and forming a place of trust and safety in which the work we will do together will take place. We would surely give an introduction to the humanly constructed place in which the EFT program takes place: appropriate places for parking, location of restrooms, use of library or other resource collections. But do we attend to coming to know the natural place where the EFT program is hosted? Is the land just something we rush over from our cars to the important business that awaits us inside? Do we see our presence on the land and our relationship to the land as an important, indeed essential, component of the EFT program? Perhaps an early activity of an EFT program might be the process of drafting together a “land ethic”—the ways in which we are going to attempt to live in conscious relationship with the land under our feet, with the air that fills our lungs, with the other inhabitants of this land, and the actions to which we will commit ourselves in the EFT program to foster a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship.

An important way in which spiritual directors can play their role in the great work of our time is to make our ministry of spiritual direction as well as our enrichment, formation, and training programs as sustainable as possible. Do we encourage participants to



carpool to our events? Have we considering burning a CD of necessary handouts rather than making paper copies? Do we encourage participants to bring mugs to our events rather than use Styrofoam or paper products? On our breaks, do we inhale the empty calories of sugary baked goods, or do we mindfully savor a locally grown, organic carrot? We have probably made our buildings handicapped accessible, but do we make our grounds so? Or do we treat access to restrooms as necessary but the possibility of relationship with the natural world as an optional luxury?

Spiritual Direction and Healing the Earth-Human Split

Ralph Metzger, who has researched the connection between ecology and psychology, names as a characteristic feature of Western culture “a dissociative split between spirit and nature”; spirit is seen as not only separate from nature but also incompatible with nature and opposed to it (65). Could healing this dissociative split between spirit and nature be the next horizon of development for spiritual direction? One of the great contemporary insights about the ancient craft of tending the holy in spiritual direction is that it is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it “directive” in the generally understood sense of the word. The types of holy conversations that characterize spiritual direction have, over the centuries, expanded from a focus on prayer to include important relationships, social and cultural contexts, the felt sense of the body through bio-spiritual focusing, and even the content of the unconscious accessed through dreams. These contemporary developments indicate that spiritual directors have already gone a long way toward naming and healing this “dissociative split.”

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. The same holy Energy arises from the earth under our feet and fuses the holy dance of oxygen and carbon dioxide between the greening world and our lungs. Let us heed that sacred music drawing us into the homeward dance. May spiritual directors take their irreplaceable and unique place in the great work of our time. ■

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