

**Senior Gateway Seminar: The Universe Story**  
**Palmer Trinity School**  
**2006 – 2007**  
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**Course Description:**

The title of the course, *The Universe Story*, is taken from Thomas Berry's and Brian Swimme's book of the same title. Following the core arguments of this book and additional works by these and other authors, the course asks a series of fundamental questions. These questions would include: (1) Why do we see or experience the natural world the way we do? (2) How did we learn to see this way? (3) Why in the face of overwhelming scientific information concerning the realities of global warming, the sixth extinction event, soil, air, and water pollution do we continue to live as we do? (4) What is going to motivate us to live differently?

These questions and the construction of the course arise then from a series of assumptions that would include: (1) The way we see ourselves and the world is embedded in a worldview. (2) Worldviews are primarily transmitted through narratives, especially cosmological myths. (3) Myth is here understood as a narrative that expresses how a people or culture view the world and that a cosmological myth in particular narrates the origin, nature, and purpose of the *kosmos* and the human role within it. (4) Starting with the Scientific Revolution and continuing up until the present, astronomy, physics, geology, and evolutionary biology in particular have been creating a new cosmology, an epic of evolution, whose implications have not been culturally grasped nor integrated. (5) These revolutions demonstrate that humanity is intimately linked to stellar and planetary evolution and thus by definition cannot be separate from the natural world. (6) The implications, integration, and application of these scientific principles are absolutely necessary to, but not sufficient for, solving the current environmental crisis. (7) Necessary, but also not sufficient, in solving current global ecological problems are the moral and spiritual agency of the world's religious traditions. (8) These religious traditions model commitment and relationship to something higher than individualistic satisfaction; they model moral action emerging out of a relationship built on love.

Our culture's current construction of the world is one that creates humanity as separate and disconnected from the world around us. This isolation, indifference, and objectification of nature are root causes of the environmental crisis. These perceptions run counter to what the sciences are telling us about how deeply humanity is embedded in the evolutionary processes of the earth. One step towards healing this disconnection is to help students begin to see the truths the sciences are showing us and to move into an active relationship with the natural world around them. This call to new relationship is based on the conviction that we cannot love, appreciate, value, or serve what we do not know. First steps towards moving into relationship with the natural world are grounded in beginning to know it, a knowing redefined as relational and thus loving, a bond not based on objectification, disconnection, and dominance, but on compassionate

and responsible connection. “[K]nowledge is a prerequisite for love. ‘Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration,’ wrote the great Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin near the end of his life. For Teilhard, as with many poets and mystics, prayer is a meditation on the world, informed by knowledge, open to mystery.”<sup>1</sup> Out of this knowledge and relationship, this openness to mystery comes experiences of awe, wonder, and beauty for the intricate and yet profoundly simple world around us.

## **Methodologies and Grading**

This course is designed to be an interdisciplinary seminar. That interdisciplinary nature is reflected in the content of the readings and in the course being cross-listed in the history, science, and religious studies departments. As a seminar core educational activities will center on extensive reading and written reading notes, Harkness discussion, and the writing of formal papers. Other educational methods will include observational and reflective journal writing and class field trips.

**Reading and Reading Notes** – As an honors course you can gauge the reading and note-taking process as running between 45 – 60 minutes five nights a week. Due to the reading load you can count on regular class reading days. It is essential that you do the reading. Without doing the reading you cannot participate fully in Harkness discussion nor respond and reflect fully in written papers. Students who enrolled in Religion in America already know the tricks to intensive reading and reading notes. For those who are new to the seminars time will be spent showing you what to do and helping you learn the proper balance between doing too much and doing too little. Please come talk to me if at any time you need help with this. Please see the “Survival Notes” written by last year’s Religion in America seminar and posted on Ed-Line for help and tips. This is a very valuable resource.

The reading notes for each book or article groups will be picked up and graded. I am looking for thoroughness without re-writing the book, thoughtfulness, in that, you can distinguish between central points of the reading and what might interest you, and utility in terms of Harkness discussion and essay writing. These notes are to be typed. They carry the grade weight of an essay.

**Harkness Discussion** – Edward Harkness was a philanthropist who in the 1930’s promised to give Phillips Exeter a hefty financial gift if the faculty could come up with a creative and engaged new pedagogy. After several attempts the faculty met Mr. Harkness’s guidelines. The focus was on a text centered, student centered discussion that treated students as a responsible community of committed learners. These discussions took place around an ovoid table and were not teacher driven. Harkness is not typical discussion where the teacher is the expert (“Socratic”) eliciting responses or thoughts from students. Equally different from other discussion methodologies is the Harkness focus on listening and conversation as opposed to student achievement being promoted as the first to speak. Your syllabus section on First Class contains more material on Harkness. These notes have a section called “How will I grade you in

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<sup>1</sup> *Natural Prayers*. Chet Raymo. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Ruminator Books, 1999.

Harkness?” Here too, if you are new to Harkness, do not worry. I will clearly explain the guidelines, and we will always take time in class to helpfully critique the day’s discussion.

Harkness grades will be calculated for each major reading. I keep a spreadsheet for the class where each day I make notes. These notes become the basis for my grade. I will write you a short statement of comments and the resulting grade for each major reading.

**Essays** This course will have an intensive writing component. The vast majority of these assignments will be formal essays analyzing the reading you have done. Here is where your reading notes and Harkness conversation notes are essential. Papers run from three to seven pages in length. Time is often given in class for writing, and I am always available to proof drafts. Writing in this class is viewed as a constant process of revision. You should count on writing and rewriting. One component of being a laptop school is that you should find it very easy to keep your papers in an electronic file. As you finish revisions you should keep your papers in the order that they were written. These papers are bound together at the end of the year and become a part of your class portfolio and the end of the year oral exam.

Essays are graded using the SAT Essay Scoring Guide. A copy of the rubric is included in your First Class “Syllabus” section. This rubric is used by the English department and should remind you that writing style and structure are as important as content.

**Portfolio and Oral Exam** Your portfolio is a bound copy of your writing and forms the basis for your final exam. The final exam is an oral exam that takes the form of a discussion. Interested faculty members, administrators, and students are invited to attend. Each student’s portfolio will be read by at least two faculty members or administrators so that they can engage you directly about your thoughts. The exam lasts for two hours. As we get closer to the end of the year we will discuss the exam in more detail.

### **Policies, Procedures, and Expectations:**

1. Late work on any assignment is penalized. Every day that an assignment is late the grade drops a full letter. On the third day I give the assignment a grade of 40. Even if you are late with work you are still required to do it. Problems and crunches do however happen. If you take responsibility to come talk to me before the assignment is due and ask for an extension, and your request is reasonable in my mind, then I will often give you an extension. Please remember, I decide if the request for an extension is reasonable, and I have the right to say no. Late work based on excused absences follows the policy of the student handbook.
2. As we are a laptop school I expect you to have a working laptop that you can access quickly. You need a laptop for word processing and access to First Class and Ed-Line. On your laptop you have a “Universe Story” icon. The class icon is the major way you will receive articles for reading and discussion. I will email you these articles in PDF format. Articles are mailed by sections of study. It is your responsibility to print these articles, either at home or in the library. I will let you know in class when each reading section is posted and ready for printing. Due to the nature of the class and in the interests of learning new habits I would like those of you in last year’s Religion in America to

print your materials on the second side of Religion in America documents. Recycle - Reuse

3. Easy access to Ed-Line is just as important. Our class page will contain several important documents. First, I post your assignment schedule there that covers six to eight weeks at a time. Print this out. It will help you plan your academic week and look ahead to larger assignments. This time management skill is an important one to learn for college. Our general reading and writing plan will be posted there as well as the class bibliography. We will be doing some important web site work – for information and for reference; these sites as a whole are posted on Ed-Line as well under *Class Web Sites*.

### **Books Required for the Universe Story**

#### **Summer Reading**

*Ocean's End: Travel Through Endangered Seas* Colin Woodward

#### **School Year**

*Dream of the Earth* – Thomas Berry

*Earth in Mind* – David Orr

*Hidden Heart of the Cosmos* - Brian Swimme

*Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores the Mysteries of Man and Nature* – Loren Isley

*Hope Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* – Bill McKibben

*Sacred Santa: The Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* – Dell DeChant

*Sixth Extinction-* Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin