



QUAKERS AND THE NEW STORY

HEALING OURSELVES AND THE EARTH

**THE NEW
STORY
GROUP**
at
Friends
Meeting
at
Cambridge

QUAKERS AND THE NEW
STORY:
HEALING OURSELVES AND
THE EARTH

*Working document describing the interests and
understandings of the New Story Group,*

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PICTURE CREDITS

Pictures are used by permission from the gallery of Mary Coelho, <http://newuniversestory.com/newstory/>

Cover Picture: *The Great Red Oak*

This magnificent 400-year-old red oak stood until recently on the bank of the Hudson River. The 200-million-year geological formation known as the Palisade escarpment is across the Hudson River from the tree. The tree was in the backyard of the house where Thomas Berry studied and wrote for a number of years. He taught us to move from a human-centered to an earth-centered norm of reality and value, so that, in these transitional times, we may discover our authentic role in the great work required of us as a result of our new understanding of the depth of human belonging to the earth and universe.

INTRODUCTION



1 The Cosmos

There is a new story.

We need a new story, because the old stories don't work. For centuries our Western culture has propounded separately a “science” story and a “religious” story, so that many Quakers, as well as others, have lost an integrated story. These stories have objectified the physical world, a major factor in opening the earth to unrestrained exploitation. They have also denigrated those spiritual experiences that reveal the depth of our belonging to the earth. The New Story,ⁱ based on the discovery of the evolutionary universe and other scientific breakthroughs, invites us to bring our divided experiences together. Thomas Berry wrote “Only when we begin to think of the emergent universe as the comprehensive realm of the sacred will we be able to overcome our present assault on the universe in its Earth manifestation.”ⁱⁱ

The Quaker way is a tradition that is ready and able to receive the many messages of the New Story. Because we believe in continuous revelation and are not bound by creed, we have historically been open to integration of the science of evolution with our faith. We offer a home for those seeking to nourish their integrated spirituality in a community based on love and social action.

NEW PATHS IN SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY



2 Star Formation (Detail)

One bridge between the science story and the religious story is the recognition of directionality in evolution now accepted by some scientists. There has been a remarkable increase in complexity of matter in the universe since the “Big Bang” 13.8 billion years ago—an increase also evident in the seamless, unending chain of biological events on earth. Some scientists believe that the universe would not have progressed beyond complex molecules in these 13.8 billion years if all change were only random.ⁱⁱⁱ This assumption of directionality sharply contradicts the neo-Darwinian insistence that change results only from random events—a view that dangerously and tragically undermines individual agency and significance.

The increase in physical complexity parallels an increase in consciousness,^{iv} which includes the emergence of self-awareness. We learn we are part of a world of intricate physical laws as well as spectacular novelty, resulting in exquisite creativity over time.

How can we characterize this directionality? Thomas Berry, cultural historian and Catholic priest, and Brian Swimme, physicist and cosmologist, identify the direction of evolution in three ways: as increase in differentiation (diversity, variation), in subjectivity (sentience, interiority,

identity) and in communion (interrelatedness, interdependence, mutuality).



3. On Going Creativity of the Cosmos

^The understanding of quantum mechanics and theory has brought huge technological advance, requiring scientists to rethink the nature of reality. Research has revealed that many of the “classic” laws of physics cannot be applied to certain phenomena, and that a quality of unpredictability and indeterminacy pervades all things at the quantum level. Physicists have also discovered interconnectedness at this quantum level that challenges our assumptions of separateness. In fact we are not separate from nature, the universe or each other. We are an integral part of it and evolving along with it. What is our role in this increase in complexity? As contemporary philosopher Steve McIntosh^{vi} writes, we experience the directionality of evolution in human consciousness when we are moved by experiences of

truth, beauty and goodness (love). McIntosh continues the work of Alfred North Whitehead who argued that beauty or the perfection of harmony “is the aim of universal development.” Beauty may be created and experienced in a mathematical solution, a song, or a work of art as well as in nature. Astounding beauty can fill us with awe and powerful inner resonance that may determine the direction of our lives. The New Story urges us to recognize the evolutionary movement towards deepening the experiences of truth, beauty and goodness (love), and to embrace the allure of these experiences as well.

NEW PATHS IN THEOLOGY



4 Nothing is Inconsequential

Emerging religious thought also offers tools to integrate the science story and the religious story as it moves away from a “theistic” God and dualistic thinking. Theism, here defined as a traditional belief in God, presumes a dualistic separation of the spiritual from the material world. Dualistic thinking designates matter—the “stuff” of the material universe—as the subject of scientific investigation, and spirit—a supernatural quality separate from “created” matter—as the subject of theological discussion. One disastrous consequence of dualistic thinking (that is, thinking science and spirit are separate)

has been the devaluation of the natural world and concomitant degradation of the environment.

Some have rejected a traditional or theistic God by embracing non-theism or atheism, but there is another alternative. Today some Quakers, including the New Story Group, have adopted the non-dualistic approach theologians call “panENtheism,” which is neither traditional theism (God out there, transcendent, separate from the material world) nor atheism (no God anywhere). Panentheism holds that God is both immanent (permeating the entire world) and transcendent (understood nonspatially), unlike pantheism which holds that God is immanent only; that everything is God and God is everything. In panentheism, God permeates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists within God.^{vii} In panentheism God is not omnipotent, but rather is evolving with an evolving world.

We of the New Story Group in a Quaker context use the word “God” to denote a creative, alluring, and animating force in which the whole universe exists. For us the world is an essentially spiritual matrix—all living and non-living things share a common, unfathomable divine reality.^{viii} We integrate the domains of the material and the spiritual by embracing the oneness of all creation. Respect and care for the environment are a natural consequence of this belief. We see this spiritual/material wholeness as an actual manifestation in every part of reality, and also as an *evolutionary potential*. Panentheism thus offers an evolutionary spirituality. This potential to evolve gives us reason for hope.



5 Tree of Life

Traditional, dualistic religions have struggled with the concept of Jesus as both human and divine. Panentheism removes this dichotomy. Central to our Quakerism is the belief that each of us carries the divine in us. We see Jesus as more completely integrated with the divine, and therefore demonstrating the highest human potential. In the context of science, the human species is evolving. In the context of the Quaker way and a New Story, Jesus is an evolutionary figure, revealing direction for the human species.

Although two thousand years is a long time in terms of human struggle, it is nearly instantaneous in the scale of evolution. However, we also see the pace of change increasing, demanding the evolution of a higher consciousness for our survival. We look to Jesus, along with many other great figures throughout the ages, as wisdom figures, teachers of love and compassion. Like many Quakers we find present-day inspiration from what we have learned of the life of Jesus. In our faith tradition, his spirit lives within all of us. One of the ways it finds life today is through our 'leadings.'

Quakers believe that when we follow a spiritual leading we become individual agents of cosmic creativity, or what some call God's will. We believe we must actively participate in the world's directionality by moving toward beauty, truth and love. The Quaker term "following a leading" is central to the New Story Group. For Quakers it describes the pull of something fundamentally true—although perhaps not yet recognized in the wider community—to which we feel compelled to respond.

For us, the New Story is such a leading. We seek to share it more widely because we believe it is part of the change in worldview that is crucial for our survival. Science tells us that evolution is now in our hands, and this includes political, ecological, and moral evolution.

NEW PATHS IN GROUP DECISION- MAKING



6 Unexpected Interconnectedness (Detail)

One of the strengths that Quakers bring to this challenge is our group decision-making process. The Quaker process goes beyond voting or reaching consensus. In a Quaker meeting the worshippers wait in openness to the Spirit. A “gathered” meeting is one in which the group senses a shared mystical experience. Likewise, our meetings for business, based in worship, seek a truth that lies beyond individual definitions. This process, though often slow, is a method of finding the shared, higher intelligence of the group called the “sense of the meeting.” Out of this practice have appeared revolutionary ideas and spirit-led actions.

The evolutionary spirituality of the New Story holds that human species is evolving toward higher consciousness, and that this consciousness is necessary for our survival. From this it follows that striving for higher consciousness is an evolutionary imperative. We see the Quaker method of decision-making as a process for achieving that.

We believe that at this critical time in Earth’s evolution, both individuals and groups—religious or otherwise—are called to a deeper awareness of the consequences of their decisions. Our study group found the book *Presence*^{ix} was enlightening, in showing how corporate decision-making

can evolve in ways consistent with Quaker decision-making. It illustrates a process of 'emergence,' that the authors developed which can address corporate, government or social issue challenges. Emergence involves opening ourselves to transformation, individually and collectively, through deeper knowing. The Quaker practice described above encourages a higher consciousness to emerge with the participation of the Spirit. A new understanding brought forth through 'emergence' is just that.

ECOLOGY



7 The Unfolding Light

Western civilization perpetuates a powerful underlying assumption: the separation of the material from the spiritual. The cultural heritage that most of us share casts

the earth as a resource that needs to be tamed and “used” (or as we’ve found) misused. Today science has given us unimaginable powers, with technologies resulting in wondrous achievements; but these powers have also led the natural world to the edge of disaster.

As humans we can use our spiritual insight as well as our science and technology to change directions. We believe Quakers can contribute to a fundamental paradigm shift that has the capability of pulling us back from the brink of global climate disaster.

Our task, as we embrace a New Story, is to align ourselves with the basic and all-encompassing directionality of the earth’s complex systems. While science has been illuminating the glories of these systems, our civilization has been defiling them. Time is running out for us to reconsider the choices we make in our individual lives and their effect on the world’s living systems. Each of us must decide if we want to be a positive force for earth’s biosphere. We believe that committing to a process of alignment with the creative forces of evolution is a spiritual endeavor as well as an urgent calling to which we must respond.

DESTRUCTIVE FORCES IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS



8 Smoke Stacks (Detail)

We cannot embrace the New Story without addressing the challenge of the many destructive forces around us. We act both as individuals and as part of multiple systems. Cultural, social, cultural, governmental and corporate systems are complex and often driven by narrow, short term, and self-centered interests. At their worst, some might call many of these systems licensed evil.

We may see the mounting injustices and environmental degradations as too intractable, remote or enormous for any small group or individual to make a difference. Yet we also see examples of astounding breakthroughs set in motion by a few well-informed, passionate, and spiritually grounded individuals. Consider the histories of abolition, of civil rights, of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many of their champions have been motivated by a spiritual leading.

The New Story invites us to discern our part: to recognize those systems we are most involved in and to pursue ways to effect change—perhaps even with a constructively disruptive voice. As we lift up our concerns, we find others who share them, and who can join in the effort to effect change.

CONCLUSION



9 The Center of a Galaxy (Detail)

We believe that committing to this integrative process, and aligning ourselves with the creative forces of evolution is a spiritual endeavor as well as an urgent calling. Where does this place us?

We have taken heart from the work of Kenneth Boulding,^x a Quaker economist of the 20th century, for whom “the reality of religious experience is no less real than the reality learned by the senses [and science].” Boulding saw the evolutionary potential of Quakerism as far from exhausted; indeed, as still very high. He described Quakerism as a spiritual development “in a sense premature, before its time. The Quaker belongs to a kingdom that is not yet. This is an awkward loyalty to have. But it is an attitude and loyalty which points towards the future rather than toward the past...” In his words, “the Society of Friends has a great intellectual task ahead of it... [to translate its] insights into a conscious understanding of the way in which the kind of love which we treasure and covet can be produced, defended, and extended.”

Like Boulding, we treasure the many sources of psychological as well as spiritual insight that inspire a higher consciousness. Yet, while we cannot know where this New Story will lead, we invite you to join us in helping it unfold.^{xi}

END NOTES

ⁱThe New Story as a term was first used by Thomas Berry in his essay by that name published in 1978.

ⁱⁱBrian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992)

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Mary C Coelho, *Awakening Universe, Emerging Personhood* (Lima, Ohio: Wyndham Hall Press, 2002)

ⁱⁱ Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009) pp. pp. 111, 112.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter B. Todd, *The Individuation of God* (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 2012) p. 13. Citing Paul Davies. Nona Coxhead, *The Relevance of Bliss* (London: Wildwood House, 1985) p. 132. Citing Fred Hoyle

^{iv}Louis M Savary, *Expanding Teilhard's "Complexity-Consciousness"* Law, Teilhard Studies, Number 68, Spring 2014

^v Swimme, Brian and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, pp. 71-78.

^{vi}Steve McIntosh, *Evolution's Purpose* (New York: Select Books Inc., 2012)

- vii Michael W. Brierley, Panentheism: A Postmodern Revelation, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, Eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p. 5.
- viii David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 67.
- ix Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence* (New York: Doubleday, 2004)
- x Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #136, 1964)

xi



10 Magnificent Cosmos

Reading List

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<http://www.deeptimejourney.org>

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ABOUT THE NEW STORY GROUP

The New Story group was formed in 2004 when several people in the meeting who shared a common recognition of the importance of the New Story wanted to explore it further. The group has continued to grow and attract new members who are seeking a spiritual home and new visions for hope. Our goals have been to educate ourselves and spread the news of the New Story.

In our monthly meetings and yearly retreats we have discussed some of the readings listed above and struggled for a fuller understanding of the concepts expressed in this pamphlet and how they relate to the Quaker way. We continue to explore new meanings of the word “God”. Recognizing that transformative experiences are intrinsic to our identity as earth beings, we have experienced in individual ways personal spiritual growth and transformation.

We have reached out for wider audiences through publications and workshops. The original group (Mary Coelho, David Damm-Luhr, Arthur Klipfel, Nan Lee, Gwen Noyes, and Severyn Bruyn, consultant) along with Philip Clayton published the pamphlet *Quakers and the New Story, Essays on Science and Spirituality* in 2007. We hosted showings of several of Brian Swimme’s videos: *The Canticle of the Cosmos* (a 12-part series) and *The Powers of the Universe* (a 10 part series). We have also shown *The Journey of the Universe* with Mary Evelyn Tucker as part of a six week workshop. Mary Coelho and Cornelia Parkes gave a workshop at Friends General Conference on *The Depth of our Belonging*, the summer of 2012. In previous

years Mary had led several workshops at FGC inspired by the New Story. In the fall of 2013 we co-sponsored with Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries a day with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm on *Evolving Spirituality for the 21st Century: Are the Sciences Providing a New Common Ground for the World Religions?* Mary Coelho presented a paper on “The Depth of our Belonging to the Unfolding Story” at this workshop. The winter of 2014, Cornelia Parkes created and taught a First Day School curriculum for 3rd through 5th grades called *Quakers and Dinosaurs* based on three books by Jennifer Morgan, *Born with a Bang*, *From Lava to Life*, and *Mammals Who Morph*.

This pamphlet is the product of the collective writings from our 2014 spring retreat and many revisions and consultations with the group. Mary Coelho and Cornelia Parkes gave a workshop at New England Yearly Meeting Sessions, summer, 2014, on the contents of the pamphlet and received further feedback. We hope this pamphlet conveys to some degree the importance to us of our work together as we grapple with new and ancient questions.