

# AN EARTH SPIRITUALITY: A TALE OF FOUR STORIES

## A Talk to the Comox Valley Unitarian Fellowship

By

Mike Bell

September 18, 2016

### Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today. The Worship Committee has asked me to speak on one of the Unitarian seven principles. I've chosen the 7<sup>th</sup> principle

*"Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are part"*

The Title of my talk is *An Earth Spirituality: A Tale of Four Stories*.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Principle was adopted almost 30 years ago. A lot has changed since then. We are now very much aware that we are in a climate changing world. It is changing everything. So, with this new awareness, what does "respect" mean in practice? What is this "interdependent web of life"? And how are we a "part of it?"

These questions and the stories deal with the relationship between science and religion. I'm going to explore this relationship. I say explore because there are no definitive answers. We are very much wandering into a mystery.

I'm reminded of the itinerant circus tent preacher in rural America who stood up one evening in front of his audience and said, "My friends, this evening I'm going to talk to you about a great mystery. "The Imponderable I will ponder; the unfathomable I will fathom; and the inscrutable I will unscrew." I can tell you that I will not unscrew any mysteries. But maybe I can probe around the edges

To answer the questions about the 7<sup>th</sup> principle in the climate change age I'm going to develop a role play and I need your help. I'm asking you to imagine four imaginary circles with a story inside each one.

Up above my head, on my right hand side, I'm going to make the **first circle**. Inside this first circle is the **Old Cosmology Story**. Cosmology usually refers to the planets and galaxies and billions of stars. Our understanding of cosmology influences the way we see the world and give it meaning. Much of the meaning that I and other Christians have about the world originates from the teachings of religious groups, in my case The Roman Catholic Church. It goes back to my childhood and religious instructions.

**Inside the Second Circle is the Edgers' Story**. These are religious folks, all them in this talk Roman Catholics, who lived on, or still live on, the edges. But they also happen to be

scientists. These “edgers” knew that the old cosmology was no longer relevant. And they knew that for religion to remain relevant it had to find a common ground with science. So, they worked together to create a New Cosmology Story borrowing especially from Evolutions and Quantum Physics.

**Inside The Third Circle**, the one just below on my left hand side, is the **New Cosmology Story** that the maverick “edgers” came up with. I’ll outline some of the essential characteristics that help us to understand the 7<sup>th</sup> principle in a climate change world.

Inside the **Fourth Circle** on my lower right is the **Comox Valley Story**. It describes how folks might work together to help us renew and adapt our spirituality and 7<sup>th</sup> principle to make our community *climate-change-ready*.

In this role play you are the members of the **Comox Valley Unitarian Climate Change Fellowship**. You want a better understanding of the implications of the 7<sup>th</sup> principle in this rapidly changing world. In particular you want to know how to put it into practice. I hope you get some answers without getting dizzy looking at all of these circles.

Finally, in this role-play, you and I have our own distinctive roles. My role is to do the talking. Your role is to do the listening...If you should happen to finish before I do, don’t stampede for the exits. Just give me the usual knife across the throat gesture.

So, onwards and upwards to the first circle—the Old Cosmology Story.

### **Circle 1: The Old Cosmology Story**

The old cosmology was inherited from Aristotle and Plato and adopted in a Christian context by medieval theologians. It presented a three-tiered world. The heavens up above where God existed, the Earth where humans live, and some area beneath the Earth which was perhaps the place of Hell.

The Bible tells us that God created the world in six days. He then created Adam and Eve full-grown, and the Garden of Eden. They were told to increase, multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it. But Adam was told not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He disobeyed. He and Eve were cast out of the garden. His sin was extended to all humans, and to the whole earth. St. Augustine called it original sin.

Jesus came and restored our relationship with God by his death on the cross. The role of the Christian in the sinful world was to avoid temptation and follow the Bible teachings. At death our bodies would disintegrate but our souls would go up to Heaven and, passing successfully through a judgement, would live with God forever.

My version of the old cosmology is oversimplified. But I do not want to disparage it in any way. It served me, my siblings, my parents and many Christians down through the ages very well. And, for many Christians today, it still does.

And now to the second circle, the “Edgers.”

### **Circle 2. The “Edgers Story.”**

The term “out on the edges” refers to individuals who are members of a religious group and a scientific discipline. Though they live and work within science fields and religious institutions they don’t get swallowed up by the systems. They are able to step outside the inner core of their organizational cultures with its rules and regulations and thrive out on the edges where they can see the world in a different way and act accordingly.

The great physicist Albert Einstein was a scientific edger. He spoke about the personal challenge of being out on the edge. He said *“We can’t solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them.”* And he got even more specific. He said...

*“A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”*

I recently saw an interesting The New Yorker cartoon. It shows two cavemen, one at the door of the cave, the other inside the cave writing something on the wall. The one at the door is impatient and says to the one that is writing, “C’mon, Stop that crap. The bison are on the move.” And as we look at the other caveman we see he has written a formula on the wall...  $E=mc^2$ .

The point is that Einstein did not create or invent something new, like, say the Wright brothers who invented the airplane. He did not invent energy, mass and the speed of light. Einstein discovered something that was old. It had existed since the Big Bang but remained hidden. He gave us a new way of understanding existence.

And so it is with the other “edgers.” From their position on the edge they perceive the real world in new ways. They give us a new understanding of things that already exist. But it has risks.

The classic example of a scientist on the edge in conflict with the Church is, of course, Galileo. He knew Earth and the other planets were moving around the sun not, as the Bible

said, the other way around. Facing torture by the Inquisition he was forced to recant, was imprisoned and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

But I'd prefer to discuss three more recent "edgers" closer to our times: Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry and Ilia Delio. They can provide new insights into the 7<sup>th</sup> principle.

**Teilhard de Chardin** was a Jesuit priest, a paleontologist and evolutionary theorist who lived and worked in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Prior to his work in China he learned about the harshest realities of life working for the French army in the trenches as a stretcher bearer in the First World War.

In China his work on the remains of early life forms made him reflect on the nature of life. Assisted no doubt by the work of Charles Darwin, and observing the growing complexity of species and life forms, he concluded that Earth, from the very beginning, was both a physical reality and a psychic/spiritual reality. He also concluded that the human, having evolved from other species, was part of the whole creation story. The Human Story and the Earth and Universe Story are one story.

Throughout the course of his life Teilhard was continually criticized by the Church for his rejection of Original Sin and his thoughts about science and spirituality. Toward the end of his life his superiors exiled him to the U.S. He was forbidden to publish any of his books or writings. They first came into print five years after his death.

Teilhard has been rehabilitated by recent popes. But not without some controversy. When Pope Francis mentioned him in his encyclical on the environment some conservatives were angry and were challenging a familiar adage: "Is the Pope a Catholic?"

**Thomas Berry** was a cultural historian and philosophical cosmologist. He was on the edge of the institutional church. He lived in the present but, like the Roman Image of the Janus, with a head and face looking in two directions, he could see into the past and see into the future at the same time.

When he looked back within the church he saw an institution he loved and whose written scriptures inspired him. But he could also see that it was an institution locked up in its history with a suspicion of science and a belief that it was the only true church. It was bound by countless rules, regulations, and an unceasing emphasis on sexual matters to the exclusion of other more pressing concerns. And, like many other mainline Christian churches, it was losing its members, particularly among the young, many of whom believed it had become irrelevant.

When he looked into the future outside the church he saw a new world of great scientific advances that is teaching us more about Earth than we have ever known before. But he also saw harmful multinational corporations, rampant capitalism and extractive economies

that were destroying Earth. But the church seemed unaware of what was happening. It was like a damaged ship adrift in an ocean, buffeted on all sides by violent storms, trying to fix the leaks but unable to steer its way through.

When he was once asked what the Christian churches could do about Earth Day he said, “It would help if the churches put the Bible on the shelf for about but twenty years.” For Berry, Earth, not the Bible, was the primary source of divine revelation. If we lived on the moon he said, we would have no awareness of a Divine presence. That only comes from the beauty and munificence of Earth—and this revelation is available to all peoples, all religions and all forms of personal spirituality.

On another occasion, when asked if he had written anything on an Earth-based spirituality he said no. But he added, “I have written something on the spirituality of Earth you might find interesting.” Translation—human spirituality is not a separate human spirituality that uses the beauty of Earth for reflections and meditation. It is part of the spirituality of Earth within us from our creation.

**Ilia Delio** is a Roman Catholic nun and a member of the Franciscan order. She is a scientist with a doctorate in pharmacology, a doctorate in theology and an expert in the thinking of Teilhard. She is a next generation leader in the tradition of Teilhard and Berry. Her work focuses on evolution, particularly conscious evolution and quantum physics.

Delio came through a very difficult period. Pope Benedict, Pope Francis’ predecessor initiated a shameful five year investigation of American Nuns. The Vatican was concerned about feminism and nuns moving out of convents to live in communities closer to the people they were working with. With her concept of conscious evolution Delio has been very much on the outer edges in terms of traditional Roman Catholic theology—fortunately.

In 2015 she wrote a commentary on Pope Francis Encyclical on the Environment, *Laudato Si*. She praised him for bringing forward the insights of traditional leaders like St. Francis of Assisi. But she suggested that what was needed was an emphasis on a new cosmology based on modern science that would be more relevant to the modern church. This was a radical suggestion for a woman to make in an essentially patriarchal church.

With “edgers” like Teilhard, Berry and Delio and many others, it seems to me that the New Cosmology is for the developed world what Liberation Theology is for the third world. So onto our third circle, the New Cosmology.

### **The Third Circle: The New Cosmology Story**

The New Cosmology Story was influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and was formulated by Thomas Berry and his friend and colleague, Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist. It

is described in their book *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era*.

The old cosmology was built around the insights of Isaac Newton. It focused almost exclusively on astrology—the galaxies, the stars, outer space and so forth. The New Cosmology focuses on the insights of Einstein, the quantum physicists, and evolution. What is new about the New Cosmology is that it incorporates Earth and the human along with a spiritual dimension. The Universe Story and the human story is one story. Here are a few key elements

**About Evolution.** Evolution tells us that about 13.8 billion years ago there was a huge energy explosion we call the “Big Bang” that started everything. About four billion years ago a star went supernova, exploded, and created our sun and the eight planets surrounding it, one of which was our planet. About 2.6 million years ago the first human forms of life emerged. The minerals in the exploding star are found in the crust of the Earth, and the minerals in the crust of the earth are found in our human bodies and in other species. In a real sense then we are earthlings.

Evolution also tells us that Earth has evolved from simplicity to complexity. In the process it has created a great diversity of species; an inner awareness or some kind of consciousness; and community—a relationship to the rest of Earth and its species. We are part of a wholeness. Characteristic of this process in open systems like Earth, development occurs at the edges—“far from equilibrium.” Death inevitably must occur to create new life.

### **About Quantum physics**

(An aside. In my readings on the New Cosmology I came across a number of references to quantum physics. But I didn’t know anything about climate change. So I took a course. At the beginning of the course the teacher said, “Now look. You are not going to understand this. But don’t get discouraged. Nobody understands it.” He was right. I came away with a new understanding of the word “counter-intuitive.” So... I know some you are probably asking yourselves, “Why am I sitting here listening to this guy telling me about something he says he knows nothing about.” Good point. But I did pick up a couple of things I can share with you.)

Quantum Physics takes things further.

For centuries scientists have been trying to find the “stuff”—or the building blocks of life. Quantum Physicists focused on sub atomic particles—atoms, electrons, protons, neutrons—but they finally concluded that there was no “stuff” down there, no building blocks. Instead they found entangled molecules—energy forces and fields relating to one another. Depending upon how you looked at and measured them there were either

particles or waves relating to one another. And here's the clincher again. There is a *wholeness*. The relationship extends to us and to the whole universe. We are all one, inter-related wholistic entity.

Implicit in this relationship is another fact. Consciousness is not something specific to humans. The universe itself is a conscious universe. In some way the human brain is reflecting the consciousness of the universe itself and the same thing is true in various ways in all living species. In terms of evolution, as Teilhard pointed out, this consciousness has been part of our planet's existence from the very beginning. Earth has always been both a material and a psychic or spiritual reality.

Finally there is another insight that comes from both evolution and quantum physics and it is critical. It has a direct influence on us today. In their book *The Universe Story*, Berry and Swimme make the point that we are truly in a new age with a new consciousness.

For centuries we have lived in a spatial mode of consciousness—ever-renewing seasonal cycles: four seasons, night and day, seasons for planting and harvesting, etc. But though the seasons continue to exist, we have moved to a dominant time-development mode of consciousness. Time is experienced as an evolutionary sequence of ***irreversible transformations***. Five extinctions have had a profound influence on Earth. Climate change and the damage we are doing to Earth is the most recent example. So, in a very real sense we and our planet don't have to move to the edge. We are on the edge of a totally new transition—from the Holocene Age to the Anthropocene Age, from the end of the ice age 11,000 years ago to the beginnings of the industrial age towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Our problem is how to live in this new world.

So, to summarize, The Old Cosmology makes clear distinctions: the human is different from the Earth, and the human and Earth are different from the Universe. The New Cosmology is all about WHOLENESS.

- We earthlings are part of Earth and together we are part of the Universe. The Universe is our Greater Self.
- Our consciousness is part of Earth's consciousness. Human consciousness is the universe reflecting upon itself.
- The Earth is our primary source of revelation. It is available to all religions, faith groups, cultures and all forms of personal and corporate spiritualities. No particular group or church has the franchise.

- Earth is sacred. Our spirituality is part of Earth Spirituality, the *anima mundi*. It does not come down from on high. It comes up from within us through our own creation. Our spirituality is a manifestation of the Earth spirituality. It is part of our inner landscape.
- If you are a Christian like I am and believe in the Divine, you believe that creation and evolution are on-going processes. The Creator does not intervene to control our earth and lives. The Creator has created a self-organizing Earth and we humans, with our free will, are co-creators, for better or for worse.
- Finally, though we may think of ourselves as living in a stable Earth with regular seasons, the New Cosmology tells us that we live in an unstable universe of irreversible transformations. Our mission is figuring out how to accept our responsibility for living in this changing world.

### **We now come to the fourth and final circle-The Comox Valley Story**

How do we live the 7<sup>th</sup> principle in this New Cosmology? I think it comes down to living the “3-Rs”: Relationship, Responsibility, and Resilience.

**Relationship.** Everything starts with an awareness of our relationship to this valley. On the one hand we might simply see ourselves as residents who were born and grew up here or who chose this valley as a good place to move to. But, on the other hand, we might see ourselves as earthlings, first and foremost as Earth citizens. Along with the other humans and other-than-human citizens we are part of a conscious universe. In this perspective the relationship can’t just remain at the intellectual thinking level. It is a consciousness that must move from our heads and take root in our hearts. We become aware that the outer landscape is part of our inner landscape, part of our emotions, feelings and spirituality. The valley becomes our Mother Earth who is caring for us. This is a very different relationship. It is a relationship of love.

**Responsibility.** Our awareness of a true relationship with our valley brings with it a responsibility. Sometimes the responsibility requires a personal change in our lifestyles. On an individual level it is not unlike the responsibility of parents for their children or for elderly parents. But it is also a shared responsibility with the community. This may require aggressive action out on the streets. But in a world of systems change where everything is being affected and options are not easily determined I think we can learn a lesson from the “edgers.” They seemed less concerned with attacking the systems of which they were a part than with providing alternatives. In a climate change world we desperately need viable alternatives and transition mechanisms. I think the “edgers” would agree with Buckminster Fuller. *“You never change something by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”*

**Resilience**—As we have seen in this talk, loving Earth and working to heal it can be a very difficult and an emotionally trying mission. We encounter many obstacles and frustrations, sometimes in spite of our own good intentions, that do not turn out the way we want them to. This work requires resilience and a willingness to encourage and help others. The journey forward is a spiritual journey within—whatever it takes to sustain ourselves and share our hope with others.

(An aside. A small group of us are trying to create a new story around a Comox Valley Climate Change Network. We want to work with individuals and groups to see if, in addition to what they are already doing, we can work together to create a climate-change-ready community. We would be happy to accept invitations to meet with any of you or with your groups to talk about this challenge of creating a new Comox Valley Climate Change Story).

## **Conclusion**

So we have been going around in circles and telling stories: from an Old Cosmology Story, to the Edgers' Story to a New Cosmology Story, to the story of "3Rs" in the Comox Valley.

A final word about the journey we will all experience, the mysterious journey to the edge of our own earthly existence. Thomas Berry has always noted that we cannot die outside the universe. The New Cosmology tells us that there is an inner consciousness that we share with Earth and the universe which will, in some way, be eternal. I think of this often as I approach my 78th birthday in December.

But, after all I have said, it all comes down to a relationship. I always remember Teilhard's reminder about our relationship with Earth and the Universe. "We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey." And the journey continues into mystery.

I will close by reminding you of a Hindu greeting that may help us remember our relationship with Earth and our responsibilities. In Southern India, when people meet, they hold their fingers and palms together in the form of a prayer, bow slightly and say to one another "Namaste."

Perhaps, in celebrating our 7<sup>th</sup> principle, when we get up in the morning, we can look out the window at this beautiful valley we call home, bow, and say, "Namaste, the Divine in me recognizes the Divine in you."

Thank you.

Mike Bell,  
Comox, British Columbia

