The human quest to live in a cosmos

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To know the universe, the Earth - from time, space, physics and biology to evolution and planetary patterns - is a psychic-spiritual drive. It is an outward quest to know where we are, an inner quest of who we are, and an ongoing quest of why we are, why life is and how to live.

The effort to push consciousness outward, to seek understanding of the vastness of the universe and the intimacy of planetary processes are quests for knowledge, meaning and guidance. To understand the cosmos represents many journeys: an outward journey to the boundaries of the universe, Earth’s journey, the human journey, and the interior journey of integrating these together.

This has been a personal quest, from a child to the present: a way to coordinate my need to fathom the cosmos, a fierce desire for intelligibility and coherence, and an acute sensitivity towards the natural world. For those who are drawn to know the cosmos, the attraction is compelling, alluring, and even irresistible. The cosmos provokes the human mind to focus with intensity, purpose, and perseverance - to know the universe, to encounter it. The focus here is on this encounter with the living cosmos, and the living Earth.

This exterior quest is undertaken for diverse reasons. Humans look outward to touch and gauge the boundaries, and to perceive the ethos and telos of reality, to learn, be dazzled, and for some, to control. Regardless, the resulting answers about these extreme dimensions of reality transform the horizon from which we interpret human existence. Historically and currently, multiple and contradictory interpretations prevail.

Currently, what is increasingly astonishing is that everything about the universe is so much more than assumed or imagined previously. Evidence abounds about the complexities, diversifications, and development sequences of transformations, as well as the intricacies, inter-dependencies and inter-relatedness of the emergent universe. Also, in spite of the disciplinary parsing into different processes, there is coherence and continuity within the dynamics of the universe. The universe is integral: unified without being uniform. Scientific theories such as emergent complexity, entanglement, correspondence, congruence, or intelligibility are used to describe the overall coordination within the universe. Coherence, continuity and integration are also seen in the evolution and functioning of the living Earth. What is now known of the intelligibility across time, space, materiality, Earth, and the biosphere is a novel revelation about ‘where we are.’

A vital mentor on my journey is Thomas Berry; a mesmerizing and luminescent presence. His intellectual scope and erudite manner are compelling, and the breadth, depth, clarity and elegance of his vision is breathtaking. He studied Western intellectual traditions, including Thomas Aquinas and Giambattista Vico, with extensive immersions into Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. These infused his appreciation for intellectual horizons, historical periodization as well as interiority, affectivity, and spiritual disciplines. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s work seeped into many
phases of thought, as did Native American and other Indigenous peoples, absorbing a profound Earth-based awareness and animism. Berry’s intellectual life matured into a composite or synthesis, with an acute concern for the future of the Earth community. He, in my view, remains ahead of our times.

From Berry I gleaned that to understand anything we need to grasp that the universe is the primary source and reference. Everything about Earth evolved and developed from cosmic processes. All aspects of *homo sapiens* evolved and developed from Earth processes. We emerged from and are a conscious part of a living Earth. By extension and extrapolation, the most apt description of the universe is that it is alive.

Berry was known for encapsulating a life time of insights into pithy phrases. Here are a few:

- The universe is the fundamental revelatory experience.
- The three basic tendencies of the universe are differentiation, subjectivity and communion.
- The universe is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects.
- The primary intention of life is neither one of peace nor conflict, but creativity.
- The earth is primary, the human is derivative.

My early intuitions were validated and substantiated during the years of learning from Berry. The focus here is on those who allow this new knowledge - revelation - to deeply transform their worldviews, and self-understanding. Such awareness of the living universe expands interiority, and magnifies consciousness. If we can absorb it, our horizons enlarge, our awareness heightens, and our religious/spiritual sensibilities intensify. The cosmos is not a backdrop to the human drama, or a context, an unfolding, a progression or a potential. As the universe develops, it becomes more: more complex, interactive, entwined, vibrant, and intense. That is why, for Teilhard de Chardin and Berry, the best image is that the cosmos is a cosmogenesis, with nonlinear modes of continuity and coherence between cosmogenesis, geogenesis, and biogenesis. In the same manner, evolution is a process or dynamic of the biosphere from which *homo sapiens* emerged. Humans, a dimension of the living Earth, developed a form of self-reflexive symbolic consciousness that is able to perceive that these forms of genesis are ongoing. There is thus further coherence and continuity. What Berry realized is that this is radically new knowledge.

In this vein, the expansion of human consciousness into the cosmos is also the universe and Earth becoming conscious in humanity. Put differently, it is the universe reflecting on itself in human form: humans are a mode of self-consciousness of the universe. To understand and integrate that we are a self-conscious element of a living cosmos is a great challenge. The quest to live in a cosmos is thus a dynamic of the cosmos, and encounter with the cosmos: an interactive relationship between the cosmos and the human. I am not insinuating that the cosmos is seeking the human in any intentional or overt manner. I am suggesting that there is a bond, a coherence, and an affinity within the depths of the phenomenal order that incites and excites the human mind to undertake these quests. In some manner, the cosmos presses on human consciousness. Thus this exterior quest to know the cosmos is also an interior quest.

**Exteriority becomes interiority**

The realization that the exterior quest is not simply an interior activity needs to be contemplated with multiple modes of knowing. The initial insight is that if we can encounter the living universe, the living Earth, it is more than a perception of the universe within the self. It is an encounter that arises from the depth of continuity between the cosmos and humans, which is also a pervasive
fusion between exteriority and interiority. To assimilate that we are the universe reflecting back on itself is kin to contemplating the dynamics of water; the more one ponders it, the more potent and transformative water becomes.

Of course this is not a novel insight and is found in Hinduism, Confucianism, Indigenous worldviews, and elsewhere. Teilhard de Chardin pondered there must be a within of things: an interiority which is a subtle, nuanced union of matter, energy, spirit and telos that coheres the interior dynamics with the transformations to increasing levels of complexity. The within of things is manifested in the overall orientation and processes that compel atoms to transform to molecules, to form planets, Earth, an atmosphere and biosphere, to life, consciousness and self-consciousness. Herein we see something similar to the congruence, intelligibility, and coherence mentioned above. He goes farther to suggest that every evolutionary development requires an intensified and differentiated structure that corresponds to a more subtle and supple concentrated interiority and consciousness. Scientifically, reality thickens, deepens, and crosses new ontological thresholds. Physical and biospheric realities complexify. Spiritually, interiority intensifies and amplifies.

Berry concurred that there must be differentiated forms of interiority within the processes of the universe, Earth, and the biosphere. These dynamics are the creative energies interior to all sequences of transformations. These relationships between the without and within of things, between exterior and interior dynamics and processes, occur at all times and are intensified at every development phase. Berry used the language of irreversible sequences of transformations, and differentiation, subjectivity, and inter-relatedness to convey such insights.

Gaston Bachelard is one who pondered the deeper interior dynamics, and was a student of physics, philosophies of science, epistemologies, and psychoanalysis. Bachelard was interested in the intersection of materiality and consciousness, or material imagination. To encounter the living cosmos and Earth is to feel this immensity within ourselves, although described as out there. This immensity of the living Earth becomes intimate: an energy, potency or presence pressing in on human consciousness. He called this an intimate immensity. I find this to illuminate what I mean by an encounter with the cosmos.

These thinkers enlarged the modes of study and knowing to propose an elegant blend of science, history, religiosity, and poiesis. Few academics have such a breadth and depth of knowledge, or dare to propose such a synthesis. Such epistemological fluidity is uncommon, and often unacceptable in many academic discourses. It is too subjective, too emotive and imprecise, consequently dismissed. For me, however, it is cogent, brilliant and beautiful, and reverberates deeply.

Habitual modes of thought and language categories, especially in Eurowestern academia, are inadequate for this synthesis of knowledge, insights, and affectivity. Customary intellectual tools that measure, define, analyze, critique and deconstruct have limits. Such intellectual processes, while valuable, neither come from nor speak to the depth of human interiority. Hence they cannot illuminate what is being learned of the comprehensiveness and coherence of the universe. My preferred mentors (Bachelard, Teilhard, Berry, Heschel) had a great appreciation for many modes of knowing and perceiving, including dreams, stories, imagination and poiesis. Other sensibilities, such as emotions, intuitions, insights, presentiments, wonder, and wisdom are valid indicators of knowledge, and can be sources of vitality, elasticity, creativity, and inventiveness.

Conclusion
How are we to absorb these new findings about where and who we are? Even the most hard-nosed evolutionary scientists must accept that life emerged from Earth dynamics: from the interior of cosmic and planetary processes. By extrapolation, the same must be said of consciousness, self-consciousness, and symbolic consciousness. Therefore, it is logical to claim there is an emergent interiority: highly differentiated among species. Yet while the observations and logic are difficult to deny, the implications are far-reaching. Still, those who quest to live in a cosmos, encounter and experience the living cosmos.

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.” Rachel Carson

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2 This is not uniformity, or intelligent design where the configuration was predestined.

