

Spirit Earth

New Dawnings

—Carolyn Toben

I live on an earth sanctuary in North Carolina...and outside my bedroom, *if I wake up to it*, I can look out to the left and see dawn rising in the east over a small lake. On some mornings, I awaken with the whole room bathed in an orange-pink light that cannot be held but becomes a sacred moment that brings with it wonder and reverence and a sense of deep time. My dear friend Thomas Berry said the dawning of the sun “activates” a sense of the sacred in the soul.

In this historic time that Thomas called “a convulsive moment in history,” we long for new “dawnings,” sacred moments of hope that will balance and steady us during the rapidly accelerating transitions we are experiencing at both the personal and global level. In 2015, two major “moments” led the way for a larger spiritual vision that is beginning to emerge within the global community: the publication of Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*, that brings us into a new dawning of our spiritual responsibilities for “Care of Our Common Home”; and the Climate Change Conference in Paris in which representatives of 195 nations came into accord on a plan to address the drastic effects of climate change...for the whole of creation. Both bring hope for a new spiritual dawning in human history accompanied by prayers for the earth from hundreds of thousands all over the world.

Much is available to help us sustain that hope for our time on global and personal levels through the work of Thomas Berry. Thomas was a priest, monk, mystic, cultural historian, shaman, scholar, author of nine books, a prophet of hope and a visionary. *Newsweek Magazine* called Thomas “the leading spokesman for the earth” who had a “profound influence on the intellectual and spiritual history of the 20th and early 21st centuries.”



Photo by Anne Less

Thomas had the gift of inspiring others. He breathed new life into the world through his teachings and insights that literally transformed thousands of lives and birthed new social forms that are still expanding today. *Honored by the United Nations and the recipient of eight honorary doctorate degrees, Thomas spent his entire life in service to the earth and the survival of the planet through his commitment to the spiritual values he knew must evolve at this time. “We will only save what we love,” he said, “and we only love what we regard as sacred.”*

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Friends of *SpiritEarth*,

I join you and the Editorial Team in welcoming spring and bringing you this spring edition of *SpiritEarth* with the theme "Hope Rising." Amidst the disturbing newscasts of today, we can be deeply grateful for nature's newscast abounding with the sights and sounds of new possibilities, new life, and hope blossoming everywhere. Carolyn Toben's article on a New Dawning and John Haught's article on Cosmic Hope invite us to turn our hope to the future that is emerging now. Carolyn is the author of *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* and John Haught authored *Resting on the Future: A New Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*. Both Carolyn and John are urging us to see "hope rising" in our midst. As Teilhard de Chardin reminds us, "see, seeing is everything, not to see is to perish."

Judith Cauley, CSJ
Coordinating Editor

Judith is a life-long learner-educator and a student and presenter of Creation Spirituality, Teilhard de Chardin and Conscious Evolution.



Moving on...



It is with a good deal of sadness that we at The Well said good-bye to our long-time friend and collaborator, John Surette, SJ, on Sunday, May 29. John has been re-assigned by his community to serve at the Campion Renewal Center in Weston, MA. For the past 13 years, he has been an avid supporter of The Well, teaching and facilitating classes, serving on the Editorial Board of this publication, allowing his weekly homilies to be disseminated to an ever-growing list of loyal readers, keeping The Well's *SpiritEarth* Library current, being an advising force behind The Well's choice of the annual *SpiritEarth* award recipient, being one who came up with creative ways to keep The Well's reputation for being THE Midwest's premier Universe Story Spirituality Center front and center. Among so many other things, we will miss his wry sense of humor and his Boston accent.

For those of you who receive John's homilies regularly, know that after a short hiatus, we will continue to send them out. If you have missed any, you can access back issues of both John's homilies and *SpiritEarth* on our website www.csjthewell.org under the "Resources" tab.

SpiritEarth

Published by
The Well Spirituality Center,
a sponsored ministry of the
Congregation of St. Joseph
1515 West Ogden Avenue
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www.csjthewell.org

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Mission Statement

SpiritEarth is a publication that expands and advances The Well Spirituality Center's mission as a regional center for telling and engaging our Sacred Universe Story and fostering the evolving role of humankind in this great drama.

SpiritEarth is supported by contributions from our readers. Donations can be mailed to:
The Well Spirituality Center: *SpiritEarth*
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Cosmic Hope

—John Haught

The reworking of Catholic thought to fit an unfinished universe had a promising beginning with Teilhard de Chardin. Even though Teilhard's ideas were circulating during the Second Vatican Council, subsequently his systematic efforts have had little effect on Catholic life and thought. What Teilhard brings to Catholic theology today as in his own lifetime, however, is a sense of the universe that supports the revival of hope. This may turn out eventually to be his greatest contribution to the history of Christian thought. Hope, as the Protestant theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it, "has the chance of a meaningful existence only when reality itself is in a state of historic flux and when historical reality has room for open possibilities ahead." Moreover, only hope can provide an appropriate setting for effective love. Love can become real, in other words, only if what we love has a future in spite of all apparent dead ends. So it is a great gift to Christian faith, as Teilhard noticed, that science now provides irrefutable evidence that the whole universe is in flux, and hence open to realizing new possibilities in the future. Cosmology – exploration of the nature of the universe – is not irrelevant to our search for the meaning of faith, hope, and love.

Theology must first ask what the world must be like if love is to make any real difference. Before love can be actualized, it needs a world open to yet unrealized possibilities. It is not enough for theology to talk about God and the Gospel mandate to love one another. It must also ask what kind of universe might open up to a future in which love can take on a body. The assumption of an initially finished and perfected universe does not allow for such openness. Instead, it *clips the wings of hope*.

The impression of a static universe hinders the full release of love because it fails to make sufficient room for hope. The traditional theological assumption of an initially completed creation not only diminishes the space for hope, but in doing so, also shrinks the field of love's

impact. A "fixist" view of the universe limits ethical life to the acquiring of virtuous habits that enhance our moral character and our worthiness to inherit eternal life, but it allows little room for building the world, a motivation that Vatican II made essential to Catholic moral life.

Not only the sense of an initially completed creation, but also the habit of thinking about God as an "eternal now" fails to provide sufficiently hopeful space for the realization of love. It ignores in effect the primary matrix of Christian faith, namely, the ancient Abrahamic expectation and prophetic thrust into the future. A religious worldview reflective of the Abrahamic turn to the future can make religious space for recent scientific discovery. It can accommodate our new awareness that the whole universe, and not just the people of God, is on a long journey into an indeterminate future. Catholic



spirituality, however, remains shackled to a vertical, hierarchical picture of the universe in which nothing other than decay is going on across the reaches of time. The classical metaphysics of the eternal present is inclined to interpret the beauties of

Photo by Pat Irr, OSF

nature as reminder of all lost innocence rather than anticipatory signs of a cosmic future still coming to birth. Once we absorb the fact that the earth was not host to Eden in the beginning, however, we may come to realize that the cosmos and, along with it, our personal lives and communities, can still become *more* than they are now.

The universe as portrayed by contemporary science is a work in progress, still undergoing a creative transformation that began around fourteen billion years ago and that winds its way toward we know not where. Each of us is part of an immense cosmic drama, a fact that may give new significance to our lives and moral efforts. Without a horizon of expectation that links efforts to the universe's future and its final destiny, we can easily underestimate the importance of our lives. The new scientific sense of an emerging universe can help us connect our hopes meaningfully to the anticipatory outlook of Abraham, the prophets, and Jesus.

A static cosmology, on the other hand, orients our ethical and religious aspirations toward retirement in a timeless heaven above and beyond the physical universe. A universe that seems to undergo no significant transformation itself can only be “left behind” in the ecstasy of the soul’s final release from this “vale of tears.” An exclusively otherworldly expectation may be excusable given the impossible political and economic conditions in which so many human beings have lived, but an excessive preoccupation with the “next world,” as Vatican II acknowledges, can wither our hopes and divert the ethical passion necessary to build *this* world.

If the universe is still coming into being, none of us is in a secure position at present to declare, as cosmic pessimists do, that the universe makes no sense in the long run. After all, geology, evolutionary biology and cosmology now situate the earth, life, and human existence within the framework of an immense cosmic drama that is still going on and that may turn out to have a kind of meaning and purpose that presently remains out of sight. Temporary shadows and even whole epochs of darkness are completely consistent with a dramatic understanding of the universe. Since the cosmic performance may still be far from its final act, room is left for the meaning of things to emerge gradually and in a manner that will remain obscure to human understanding at any present moment. For all we know, the cosmic drama may be the carrier of meanings that can be registered only in the compassionate life of God and that now remains inaccessible to scientific investigation and prediction.

It is undeniable by any standard or measurement that the cosmic drama so far has drifted over the course of deep time from simplicity toward relatively more physical complexity. And corresponding to this general directionality, the universe has trended from less toward more consciousness. Once we realize that the universe *can* become more, therefore, we have no compelling reason to take the road that leads to cosmic pessimism. Nor is it required that Catholics and other Christians today have exactly the same thoughts about the Creator, sin, virtue, the meaning of life, or human destiny as before. If the world is still emerging, we need no longer think of Christ

and his mission in as narrow a way, cosmically speaking, as previous ages have. As far as the life of the Church is concerned, its worship, sacraments, and spirituality may need to undergo a cosmological transfiguration that our religious ancestors could never have envisaged on the basis of a static and hierarchical understanding of the natural world. God, as Teilhard rightly sensed, is not so much the governor as the goal of an ongoing cosmic process. Put otherwise, God creates and governs the world not so much by dictatorial management from above, or by pushing it from behind, as by drawing it toward a future or new being—and new meaning—up ahead.

Catholic teaching and theology will seem increasingly irrelevant to thoughtful people unless we reflect more deliberately on the meaning of the vast and still-emerging universe exposed by contemporary science. Christians who profess to love God and to have been saved by Christ will lose nothing and gain everything by transplanting their sacramental spirituality into the new cosmological setting. Our sense of the Creator, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the redemptive significance of Christ can now grow wider and deeper by immense orders of magnitude. To enlarge our faith and widen our hope today, we need to link our spiritual lives more closely than ever to the unfinished universe stretching out ahead of us, resting on the future.

We may speak in a more biblical way than ever of divine providential care as operating in the mode of *promise*. God’s providential activity is, before all else, that of providing a vision of how the world may become new, of keeping a space open for life and human freedom, and of inviting conscious and free beings to awaken to a life of patient hope and active contribution to the fulfillment of all things.

*These words are taken from John Haught’s recent book **Resting on the Future: A Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe**, used here with permission.*





She Came to the Well

She came to the Well

looking for her people

and here we were – each of us –

waiting to be found,

waiting to be discovered,

waiting to be awakened

to the Universe

in all its wonder

to our selves

in all our awe

– the awful and the awesome –

waiting to be seen,

waiting to be healed,

waiting to be birthed anew.

And along the way – as we journeyed together –
we discovered

in our laughter and in our tears,

in our sharing and in our silence,

community and belonging,

intimacy and friendship.

We discovered that we are held

in the deepest tenderness and love

and we held each other too —

because walking on the edge is a tricky business.

You could so easily fall

into the abyss –

or is it the depth

of God's love?

And now we are held

in the vast embrace

that holds the one we love

and we hold ourselves, still and silent,

and marinate in the mystery.....

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Photo by Tom Schemper

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I had the great privilege of spending many hours in deep personal conversations with Thomas Berry during the last ten years of his life after he retired to North Carolina. During our time together, he introduced me to his vast foundational thoughts that opened a portal on a new field of spiritual consciousness of the human-earth relationship that can guide us forward in this time of great transition. "We are being changed," he said. "We are being transformed to see everything in its proper proportion. We are being driven down to the heart with its radical, interior tendencies."

Towards the end of his life, I asked Thomas what thoughts he would like to share that could be helpful and hope-filled at this pivotal time in our planet's history. These were some of his responses:

"Tell them something new is happening; a new vision, a new energy, a new sacred story is coming into being in the transition from one era to another.

Tell them in the darkness of this time, a vast transformation is dawning in the depths of human consciousness which is leading to the recovery of the soul, the earth, the universe, and a sense of the sacred.

Tell them that the One loving voice that spoke through every cosmic activity is speaking again now through voices all over the earth voices that recognize that loving the earth as our common origin unifies all. In the sacred, all opposites are reconciled.

This loving voice is also speaking through every bird, leaf, and star and through the polar bear, the wolf, and every threatened species, awakening humanity to see all living forms as a single sacred community that lives or dies together.

Tell them that the concern now must be for the preservation of the whole earth, a bio-spiritual planet; tell them they must participate in mutual presence with the whole human venture in this perilous course of the future. The most basic issue is how we bond with the earth.

Tell them that each has a unique part to play in this period of great transition, no matter what age or life experience, and that each of them brings specialized

emotions and imagination to this time and very different ways of knowing...all of which are desperately needed now.

Tell them to remember as they grope forward to create a new century of life in the 21st century, that the universe is still expanding; that they are always in the process of becoming, always opening to greater and greater life if they can learn to see it.

Tell them the greatest need is to recognize the promptings that emerge from the depths of one's own being where the sacred reality of love resides.

Above all, tell them to practice an intimate presence to the beauty and wonder of the natural world through their intuitive awareness that recognizes the oneness of all life; tell them to stop and enlarge moments of hope throughout their days of the miracles and mysteries of creation all around them...the movement of a squirrel, the sound of a bird, the pattern of a leaf, changing patterns of life...the sun, rain, stars, dawn and sunset. Tell them we are not ourselves without everything and everyone else.

Tell them to remember the great seasons and cycles of life. In moments of intimacy with the natural world, they will recover the lost sense of the sacred in the human-earth relationship. And they will be participating in the evolution of a new consciousness on earth that can overcome our present division between humans and the natural world. A mutually-enhancing relationship will then become possible as the communion of all things is understood.

Finally, tell them it is of utmost importance that they become aware of the numinous sacred values that have been present in an expanding sequence over four and a half billion years of the earth's existence, and let them know they will always be guided by the same Divine Power that spun the galaxies into space, lit the sun and brought the moon into orbit."

What greater reason could we have to be hope-bearers? He spoke these words at what turned out to be my last meeting with Thomas. He passed away three days later leaving a lifelong legacy of a love that unified the whole of creation and inspires a new dawning of hope in our time. *If only we will awaken to it.*

Carolyn Toben is an educator, counselor, creator of new social forms and author of *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry*. Carolyn founded The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in Whitsett, North Carolina.

After reading Carolyn Toben's article "A New Dawning" and John Haught's article "Cosmic Hope," what response would you make to these questions:

Where do you see "hope rising" at this time?

What is your sense of our hope "resting on the future"?

Please send your thoughts to Judy Cauley at jcauley@csjoseph.org to be included in the next edition of *SpiritEarth*.

Both John Haught and Carolyn Toben will be coming to The Well in the Fall—come hear them in person!

John Haught • "Science, Theology and Pope Francis' Ecological Vision" • Thurs., September 22, 2016

Carolyn Toben • "A New Dawning" • Sat., November 12, 2016



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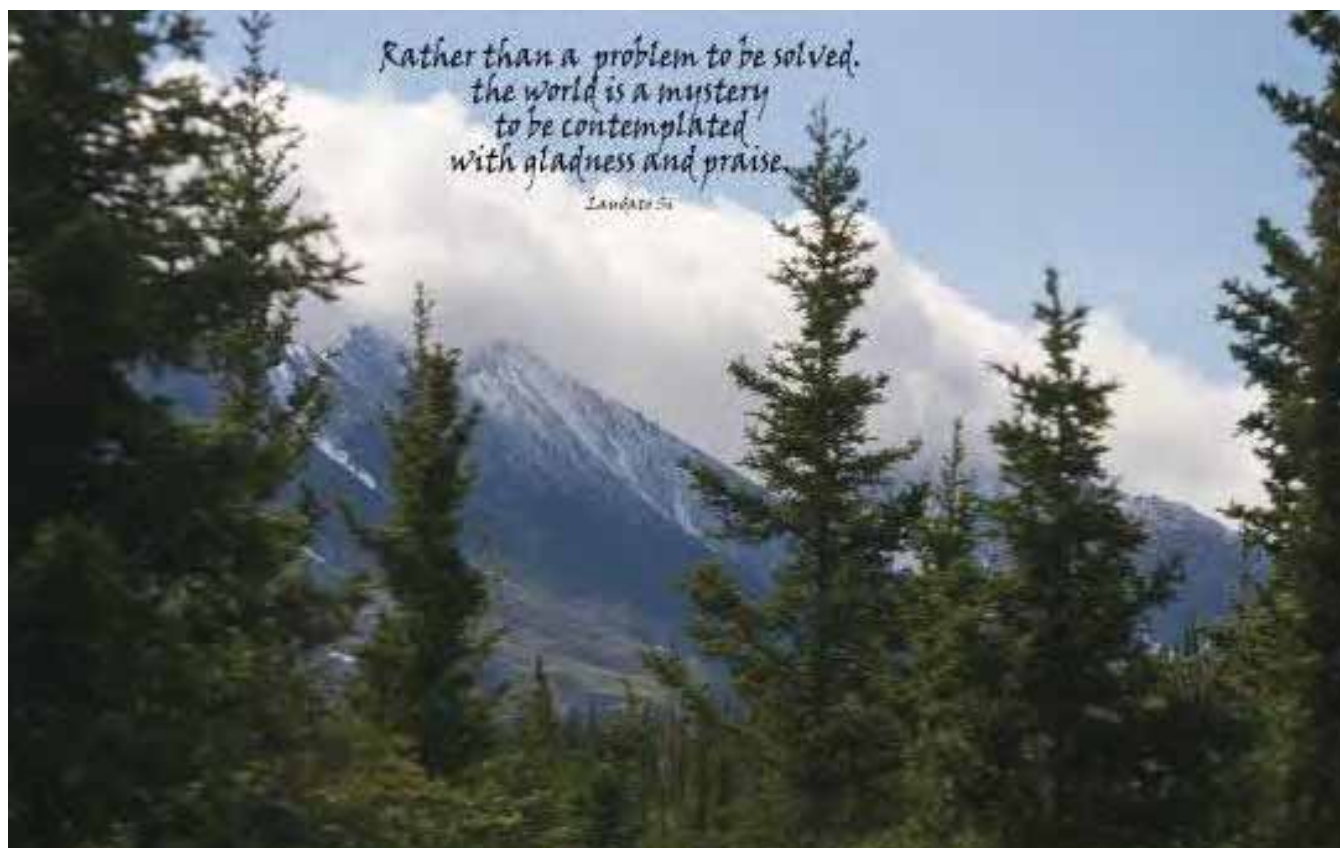


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