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The New Universe Story as Leaven for Transformation
L'histoire du nouvel univers en tant que levain du changement
La historia del nuevo universo como levadura para el cambio

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine comment motiver les personnes de bonne volonté à déceler les signes d'une planète en détresse, à reconnaître notre paralysie humaine et politique, et à changer notre comportement à la mesure du défi historique que nous confrontons. Dans le cadre d'une « *tapestry of stories* » (tapisserie d'histoires), nous examinons comment la création elle-même apprend, recherchant des indices sur la façon dont les humains peuvent appréhender les changements et les effondrements des grands systèmes dans lesquels nous sommes immergés. Thomas Berry appelle ceci la « *great work* » (l'œuvre primordiale) de notre temps. En fin de compte, nous concluons que le pouvoir dont nous avons besoin pour lutter contre le changement climatique n'est pas l'éducation, l'activisme ou le financement, aussi importants soient-ils. En tant que dimension intégrale d'un processus évolutif de 13,8 milliards d'années, la conscience réflexive humaine est un pouvoir auquel nous pouvons faire appel. Un changement de conscience majeur, lié à une nouvelle compréhension de notre place dans l'univers, constitue l'impératif moral de notre époque.

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The New Universe Story as Leaven for Transformation

Veronica Dunne

Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions

Abstract

This paper explores ways of motivating persons of good will to see the signs of a planet in distress, recognize our human and political paralysis, and change our behavior in ways commensurate to the historical challenge we face.

Framing this exploration within a tapestry of stories, the author examines how creation itself learns for clues as to how humans may grasp the large systems changes and collapses in which we are immersed. Thomas Berry calls this the “great work” of our time. In the end, the paper concludes that the power we need to address climate change is not education, activism, or financing, as important as these are. As an integral dimension of a 13.8-billion-year evolutionary process, humans’ reflexive consciousness is a power we can call upon. A major shift in consciousness, related to a new understanding of our place in the universe, is the moral imperative of our time.

Keywords: Thomas Berry, cosmogenesis, RNDM, environmental well-being

La historia del nuevo universo como levadura para el cambio

Resumen

Este artículo analiza formas de motivar a las personas de buena voluntad para que vean las señales de un planeta en peligro, reconozcan nuestra parálisis humana y política y cambien nuestro comportamiento de manera acorde con el desafío histórico que enfrentamos. Enmarcando esta exploración dentro de un “tapiz de historias”, la autora examina cómo la creación aprende por sí misma, en busca de pistas sobre cómo los humanos pueden captar los grandes cambios y colapsos de los sistemas en los que estamos inmersos. Thomas Berry llama a esto el “gran trabajo” de nuestro tiempo. En la parte final, el artículo concluye que el poder que necesitamos para abordar el cambio climático no es la educación, el activismo o la financiación, por importantes que sean. Como dimensión integral de un proceso evolutivo de 13.800 millones de años, la conciencia reflexiva de los humanos es un poder al que podemos recurrir. Un cambio importante en la conciencia, relacionado con una nueva comprensión de nuestro lugar en el universo, es el imperativo moral de nuestro tiempo.

Palabras clave : Thomas Berry, cosmogenesis, RNDM, bienestar medioambiental

L’histoire du nouvel univers en tant que levain du changement

Résumé

Cet article examine comment motiver les personnes de bonne volonté à déceler les signes d’une planète en détresse, à reconnaître notre paralysie humaine et politique, et à changer notre comportement à la mesure du défi historique que nous confrontons. Dans le cadre d’une « tapestry of stories » (tapisserie d’histoires), nous examinons comment la création elle-même apprend, recherchant des indices sur la façon dont les humains peuvent appréhender les changements et les effondrements des grands systèmes dans lesquels nous sommes immergés. Thomas Berry appelle ceci la « great work » (l’œuvre primordiale) de notre temps. En fin de compte, nous concluons que le pouvoir dont nous avons besoin pour lutter contre le changement climatique n’est pas l’éducation, l’activisme ou le financement, aussi importants soient-ils. En tant que dimension intégrale d’un processus évolutif de 13,8 milliards d’années, la conscience réflexive humaine est un pouvoir auquel nous pouvons faire appel. Un changement de conscience majeur, lié à une nouvelle compréhension de notre place dans l’univers, constitue l’impératif moral de notre époque.

Mots clés : Thomas Berry, cosmogenesis, RNDM, le bien-être environnemental

Introduction

This inquiry began as a concern for the present state of our planet-home and what formal education might contribute to motivating earth's citizens to address that concern. In a time of climate change, which has become climate crisis and is now seen by many as climate catastrophe, the concern carries an escalating urgency. In addition, the damage to earth's biodiversity is proceeding at a pace faster than previously thought. Whole species are being wiped out, and once gone they are gone forever. While death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life, the ecocide in our time is primarily caused by human activity, which is changing the chemistry of the planet. With so much information I was discovering online and in print, I was further distressed by our human and political paralysis in changing our behaviour in ways commensurate to the challenges we face.¹

Besides the damage humans are wreaking on earth, there is the accompanying mental distress, especially among young people, many of whom are experiencing debilitating eco-anxiety. It has become increasingly clear that what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. In the face of this multi-faceted dilemma, our human task, what Thomas Berry calls the "great work"² of our time, is conveyed in a single foundational sentence with seven phrases:

The historical mission of our time is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.³

For Berry, the universe is not a place, but a developing community of beings, not just a "cosmos," but a "cosmogogenesis." The whole has been in motion and evolving for billions of years since the originating Big Bang. For Berry, "story" is the only adequate way to frame the immensity of the creation of our universe, over an unfathomable stretch of about 13.8 billion years. While hints of this story came to us from science in the 20th century via the calculations of Albert Einstein and the

¹ As I researched further, I became aware of the incredible amount of information available about the new cosmology, particularly online. Through the efforts of scientists, educators, feminists, historians, theologians, and whole new groups of teachers/learners claiming the "deep" descriptor to focus their interest in the story of the unfolding universe (deep-ecologists, deep time theorists, deep economists, deep-historians etc.), profound new insights are emerging. Universities like Yale, (Forum on Religion and Ecology), as well as academically aligned initiatives like Coursera made ecological resources readily available and much of it online. The University of St. Michael's College, (Elliot Allan Institute), and St. Paul's University in Ottawa are two other educational institutions committed to ecological education. The words and advocacy of noted scientists and natural historians like Carl Sagan, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, David Suzuki, and David Attenborough brought awareness to the general public through their books and television presentations, many of which are now available through YouTube. So a wealth of information was available for humans, and much of it was on-line.

² Accomplishing a great work, known classically as a *magnum opus*, was often the goal of philosophers, scientists, musicians, and artists. For Thomas Berry, humans' great work today is "to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner." See Thomas Berry *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower – Random House, 1999), 3.

³ Berry, *The Great Work*, 159.

telescopes of Edwin Hubble, those understandings have been greatly amplified in the years since. With the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) on December 25, 2021, science has taken another great leap in learning about our universe as “cosmogenesis.”⁴

Berry’s foundational statement thus became the framework for this investigation. As I muddled through the amazing amount of data I was finding, my research question shifted to a sphere in which I was already immersed, and in which I had some data to suggest further productive ways for humans to interact with the immense creativity and energies of the cosmos. That sphere was the religious congregation of which I am a part, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions (RNDM). It is with the RNDMs that I am personally “attached to life at all four corners.”⁵ It is the RNDM community, and its joys, sufferings, commitments, and imaginative works that have spun a durable web for my life, and for numerous RNDM women in Canada and around the world.

Rosa Bruno-Jofré had recently published a book about us entitled *The Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions: From Ultramontane Origins to a New Cosmology*.⁶ In this carefully researched work, Bruno-Jofré tracks the journey taken by the RNDM Canadian Province from its austere beginnings in Manitoba in 1898 until 2008, “when the congregation as a whole redefined its mission and vision as RNDM Earth Community.”⁷

As I pondered, I came to see our RNDM challenge, and basic human challenge, as responding to Berry’s foundational statement, creating a new sense of what it is to be human, transcending not only national limitations “but even our species isolation, to enter into the larger community of living species.”⁸ I hoped that the contours of the RNDM story might provide significant insight applicable to the wider human community. To that RNDM story, particularly following Vatican II, we now turn.

The RNDM Story and Vatican II

Bruno-Jofré examines the impact of Vatican II in dismantling the neo-scholastic framework, within which the Roman Catholic Church of the RNDM founding era functioned. In fidelity to the call of Vatican II, the Congregation entered into a process of renewal that involved examining everything. It was a time of “returning to

⁴ On July 12th, 2022, the first five scientific images taken by the JWST were released to the public. These photos carry information about the early universe, the birth and death of stars, and the collisions and explosions of galaxies. The beauty and level of detail in the photos evoked tears in many scientists working on the project, which is not a typical scientific response. For more, see “First Images,” NASA (July, 2022), <https://www.nasa.gov/webbfirstimages>

⁵ Virginia Woolf. “Fiction Is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.” *A Room of One’s Own*. (London: Penguin Books, 1945), 43.

⁶ Rosa Bruno-Jofré, *The Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions: From Ultramontane Origins to a New Cosmology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

⁷ Ibid. 3.

⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 42.

sources” and renewing the original vision of the founders. The sociological, psychological, and theological ferment that accompanied Vatican II was both enticing and disorientating.⁹ Paradoxically, at a time when the RNDMs were emerging into the modern world, Western cultures were moving from a modern to a post-modern sensibility. Everything in RNDM life was in flux.

Bruno-Jofré’s book illuminates the Sisters’ active responses to Vatican II and how their collective consciousness was being shaped by multiple factors, including the “new cosmology.”¹⁰ As a member of the RNDMs, I was intrigued by Bruno-Jofré’s research and conclusions, and from within the framework she articulated, I understood in new ways the history I had personally lived for over fifty years as an RNDM.

In researching our archives and interacting with numerous RNDMs, Bruno-Jofré had come to conclusions I had not yet recognized. However, in recognizing them, and recognizing more clearly how we had been impacted by an emerging new cosmology, I was fascinated by how it happened; how this “yeast,” active among us, had catalyzed so much change. In this paper, I pick up on the RNDM understanding of cosmology from the 2008 General Chapter meeting and look at what our subsequent steps have been. In doing so, I hope to contribute in some small way to the well-being of our planet-home, which humans at present seem incapable of addressing in a way equal to the challenge.

In setting myself to the task of this essay, I write not as a scholar of astrophysics or a scientist of any kind, nor do I write to present a summary of such scholarly thought. I write to acknowledge a path RNDM have been walking, by taking a retrospective look at aspects of the collective life of the RNDMs in Canada as articulated by Bruno-Jofré. I will offer some reflections of my own evolution of consciousness as an RNDM, which may shed some light on the collective RNDM “emergence.” I search for ways that we might take a “next step” on our common ecological journey, in ways that would be significant for us and catalyzing for the cultures in which we live.

⁹ For RNDMs, that ferment had an individual and collective aspect as Sisters’ identities were shaken about at the intersections of tradition and renewal. Social justice, feminist/womanist/mujerista/Asian liberation movements, evolutionary science, pedagogical advancements, peace-movements, eco-spirituality, new understandings of Mission, and critiques of Western cosmology were all areas calling for attention.

¹⁰ The Sisters were growing increasingly familiar with the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, and Mathew Fox among others. Feminist scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Ivonne Gebara and Sallie McFague likewise illuminated and enlarged the Sisters personal and theological horizons. Educator Maria Montessori also proposed a sense of the importance of “Cosmic education” which provided children with a framework for understanding their world and their place in it. Thomas Berry references Maria Montessori in *The Great Work* on page 16.

A Tapestry of Stories

I will tell this tale as a tapestry of stories;¹¹ first of all, the story of the universe. All our other stories are best understood in the context of that 13.8-billion-year story. In the context of the universe story, and Bruno-Jofré's small story of the RNDMs, I will also share stories from Indigenous author Tomson Highway, "geologist" Thomas Berry, and Apollo 9 astronaut Rusty Schweickart, all woven together in my story about these stories.

Telling stories requires language, and the scaffolding of language, to serve thick or thin narratives about any reality. To tell a story truly requires many languages and many scaffoldings. Language is complex and value-laden, and as Swimme and Berry note, "... we have so far had a human-centered language. We need an Earth-centered language."¹² For all our scientific marvels, language is still our most advanced technology, and language reveals itself in story.

At the beginning of their book about the universe, Swimme and Berry note that some variant of this "big story" of the cosmos has been told by the peoples of earth in many times and many ways, from hunter-gatherer societies to Neolithic villages to the Classical civilizations of the last 5,000 years. The purpose of such stories was to give meaning to life, and provide a large context in which to pose large questions, cosmological questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? What does my life mean?

Swimme and Berry contend that in our time, we largely lack a comprehensive story of the universe. The origin stories of many cultures, as well as subsequent "world histories," deal not with the whole world, but with the human, "as if the human were something separate from ... the story of the Earth and the universe."¹³ At the same time, scientists have focused on the physical dimensions of the story and have not accounted for the human dimension of the universe. In turning to the whole story of the universe, they contend we have an opportunity to re-imagine and re-form how we see the world and ourselves. Put another way, "To tell the full story of a single particle we must tell the story of the universe, for each particle is in some way intimately present to every other particle in the universe."¹⁴

¹¹ From ancient times, stories humans tell have been meant to transmit knowledge, values, ethics and traditions. The Wisdom writings of Greek and Roman times, the Hindu Upanishads, the Buddhist Dharma, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Quran of Islam, the oral traditions of Indigenous peoples around the world, all convey rich stories, and serve the transmission of cosmic energy. Those stories focus primarily on the human. The story of the universe as told from the perspective of science, includes all life-forms and tells a story of the evolutionary process of the whole.

¹² Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 258.

¹³ Swimme and Berry, *The Universe*, 1.

¹⁴ Swimme and Berry, *The Universe*, 29.

By Means of Story and Shared Dream Experience

For insight into cosmic realities, it can help to tell human stories of earth experiences. As an example, I turn to Tomson Highway, Cree author, musician, playwright, and storyteller. In his recent memoir, which he describes as “a symphony to life,” Highway writes of paddling across Reindeer Lake in northern Manitoba: “Late this one night, the stillness of both air and water is such that one can hear the leaves of birch trees breathing, fish fins plying through water.”¹⁵ He tells a story of canoe travel with his father Joe Lapstan Highway:

The trip to Jack Pine is always fun. Our business [...] finished this particular day—our fish sold, our payment collected (in cash), our groceries bought—Dad and I start for the unnamed island, on which we are living that summer. [...] We get held up at our starting point, so we leave late, so late, in fact, that it is dark by the time, we are halfway home. The boat, now bare, but for empty fish crates, a box of groceries, and sundry items, Dad stops the boat somewhere [...] and rolls a goose-down sleeping robe out on the floor at the bow and puts me there, well wrapped and warm [...] Then restarts our ten-horsepower outboard motor.

So there I am at age seven years, enveloped completely by piles of goose-down, gazing sleepily at a cloudless sky with its trillion stars and faint pulsations of silver light, a hundred stripes standing parallel, and reaching to Orion, the lonely hunter. It is *waawaa-steewak*, the northern lights, the north’s great miracle. Being sung a lullaby by the drone of the motor accompanied by the sibilance of water lapping at the boat, the rocking cradle I find myself in that August night, bestows on me a sense of security that will last me a lifetime.

For Highway, this moment of profound connection reveals an anchor for his life, a life-giving referent for all that follows. He continues:

When I think back on it, even the fact that I am a “girl” does not phase Dad. He sees me playing “girlie” games - putting on Mom’s apron, for example, and pretending it’s a skirt—but, to him it makes no difference, even when he sees the “macho” Fitzgerald boys at old Brochet’s Companeeck store mocking me. Where too many men would beat the woman out of their effeminate boys to turn them into men, thus destroying the lives of those boys, the lives of their families and, most blindly, their own, the world’s most athletic, most masculine man, world champion dogsled racer Joe Lapstan Highway, loves me even more.¹⁶

¹⁵ Tomson Highway, *Permanent Astonishment: A Memoir* (Doubleday Canada-Penguin Random House Canada, 2021), 131-132.

¹⁶ Highway, *Permanent Astonishment*, 129-130.

Highway has an intimate sense of presence with his father, and also with the trees, the waters, the stars. This experience grounds his life, and when hard times present themselves, he has an inner confidence that faces the abuse of the “Fitzgerald boys” and passes through it with considerable equanimity.

Staying Awake to the Call of Earth

From this moving personal story, I now return to the collective story of the RNDMs in Canada. Here, too, there are stories within stories; stories of an old country (France) meeting a new country (Canada), stories of an absolutist Catholic church meeting the stark realities of the Canadian prairies, stories of French missionaries taking up their lives in a harsh and beautiful land, stories of education and language, of displacement and sacrifice, of connections with Indigenous persons and tragic ruptures.

To reprise Berry’s insight, “To tell the story of anything, you have to tell the story of everything.”¹⁷ The evolutionary journey of the Cosmos, the evolutionary human journey, and the evolutionary RNDM journey—all journeys within journeys, systems within systems, stories within stories. As in creation and eco-systems, as in bodies of bears, birds, bass, and humans, so within history and the diverse cultures humans create in time, everything is connected.¹⁸

In a section of her book entitled “The Canadian Province: Nurturing an Ecological Spirituality,” Bruno-Jofré articulates the movement she sees in the Congregation’s emergence in 2008 as an RNDM earth community.¹⁹ She details the steps taken by the Canadian Sisters through the 1980s to 2008 and names the evolution in the province towards a deepening eco-spirituality. She notes that beginning in the late 1980s, RNDMs had come to summarize the “fundamental intuition” of their lives as being grounded in contemplation, communion, and mission.²⁰

Vision and direction of a religious congregation is typically set at a General Chapter, which occurs every six years. General Chapters examine the present life of the Congregation and set a course for the future. In preparation for the Congregation’s 25th General Chapter in 2008, in Pattaya Thailand, Congregation

¹⁷ Thomas Berry in *The Awakening Universe*, directed by Neal Rogin & Christine Funk (San Francisco: The Pachamama Alliance, 2006). <https://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/news/the-awakening-universe-now-available-on-vimeo>

¹⁸ Veronica Dunne, “Canada 1898-2011,” in *Zeal for Mission*, ed. Susan Smith (Auckland, New Zealand: David Ling Publishing, 2012), 232-253.

¹⁹ Bruno-Jofré, *The Sisters*, 194 - 201

²⁰ I will further develop this thought another time. I find it interesting that this “fundamental intuition” dynamic has hints of Berry’s three principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion, and Teilhard de Chardin’s sense of “zeal for creation.” For more, see Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry: Interiority and Subjectivity,” Center for Christogenesis. March 26, 2019. Available at: <https://christogenesis.org/pierre-teilhard-de-chardin-and-thomas-berry-interiority-and-subjectivity/> Accessed January 25, 2023.

members had studied the Earth Charter.²¹ Sisters from twenty-two countries were Chapter delegates, and most were familiar with the work of Teilhard de Chardin and Mathew Fox, all of which became grist for the Chapter's communal mill. Over the course of six weeks, these international delegates discussed, debated, and discerned the emerging directions of the Congregation for the next six years, and how they would be implemented. Within the large story of the universe, awareness that everything in creation is in relationship becomes clearer. As a consequence, we also came to a further appreciation of the Congregation's internationality, and the accompanying need to face the colonial dynamics still alive among us. New awarenesses of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and consumer capitalism also emerged. In conversations, in times of silence, through journaling, art, writing, walking, and prayer, we wrestled and rejoiced with our emerging understandings of the new cosmology and its myriad implications for our lives. Aligned with Bruno-Jofré's assessment in her history, there is also a Congregational consensus that the document that came out of the 2008 Chapter was pivotal for RNDMs.

At this point, I inject a personal story. I was one of three writers who crafted this document from the thoughts, struggles, and creative conversations put forward by all members of the Chapter.²² In the poetry of its language, the clarity of its goals, and its practical applications, the Chapter document entitled "RNDM Earth Community: We Are One, We Are Love," has clear echoes of the Earth Charter, as well as the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry. It did not start that way! We writers struggled to create a narrative that could convey something of what we had lived and seen together in Chapter. When we presented our first draft to the Steering Committee of Chapter 2008, we all knew we had fallen far short of our mark. We went back to drafting, and basically decided that to tell the story of what had happened for us in Chapter was the message we wanted to convey to the Congregation and to the world.

When we finally presented our oft-revised draft to the members of the 2008 Chapter, we did so orally, standing before the Sister-delegates. At the end of our reading there was a silence, and then the Sisters responded with spontaneous applause followed by verbal affirmation. I remember feeling so relieved, so elated, and so grateful. We had been able to put the insights and the hard work of the Chapter into words that spoke to all of us in a way, however partial and incomplete. It was another example of the importance of telling the story and the power of

²¹ The idea of the Earth Charter originated in 1987, when the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development "called for a new charter to guide the transition to sustainable development." The Rio Declaration became the statement of the achievable consensus at that time. Work on the charter continued with the support of prominent persons and engaged academics from all parts of the world. Finally, on June 29, 2000, the Earth Charter Commission with the support of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands formally launched the Earth Charter at the Peace Palace in The Hague. It is "an ethical foundation for actions to build a more just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It articulates a mindset of global interdependence and shared responsibility. The Earth Charter is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yf7xtuf>

²² The other writers were Kim Phung Pham from Vietnam and Madeleine Barlow from Australia.

grounding ourselves in the new cosmology. The story of Chapter 2008 now lived not only in the document, but in all of us. We affirmed our experience of ourselves as being called home to our place within the earth community. Furthermore:

We see the undeniable harm humans have done to soil, water, and air as a profound religious issue, the moral and ethical imperative of our time.

We believe that when we set our hand to the task of repair, we have vast resources of spiritual, psychological and physical energy from other human partners and from earth itself working with us, working in us. ...

We believe that our deep call today, which touches on every aspect of our religious missionary lives is to stay awake to the call of earth.²³

In situating our RNDM future within the journey of the universe, I believe our 2008 Chapter at least partially acknowledged that, "All human institutions, professions, programs, and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship."²⁴

Together, we took tentative steps toward grasping the historical mission of our times: reinventing the human at the species level. This re-invention of the human is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of Berry's *great work*, which involves re-imagining and reconstituting all human categories by which civil society organizes: governance, jurisprudence, education, religion, economics, etc.

A deeply human endeavour that awakens humans' spirits is music.²⁵ The Canadian delegates to Chapter had brought copies of Caroline McDade's 2007 CD *My Heart is Moved*. Of this music, sung by women from across North America, McDade says, "... we are coming to know [this music], and [it] is coming to know us. Its poetry and music arise from the energies of Creation ... in conversation with the Earth Charter." She adds:

Singing these songs, the clay of our hearts is thrown on the wheel and we find our lives different than before, reshaped and turned in new ways [...] Singing these love songs to Earth and Life, takes us as a human species, toward another place, deeper than before, in our relationships with one another, Earth and all Being. And so we sing and in singing we are changed—*forever changing*, and pulled toward who we long to be [...] humble and respectful

²³ RNDM Earth Community, *We Are One, We Are Love*. Final document of the 2008 Congregational Chapter, 18 January-15 February. Pattaya, Thailand. 4-5.

²⁴ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, eds. *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community (Modern Spiritual Masters)* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. Kindle Edition), 164-168

²⁵ Through recorded human history, music has been a source of inspiration, comfort, social dissent, entertainment etc. It is a significant way of helping to shift consciousness. In my lifetime, music catalysed the social justice and civil rights movements beginning in the 1930s through the 1960s and even to today. Music can serve as a form of protest, a form of encouragement, a source of information and inspiration that binds people together.

human communities among many, one humble and respectful species among many.²⁶

In this spirit, we left Chapter 2008 singing! We were discovering together ways to situate ourselves in the new universe story and discovering deeper modes of consciousness being woven within and among us.

Canada's Response to Chapter 2008

In the years since the 2008 Chapter, Canadian RNDMs have sought to integrate our deepening awareness of ecology and cosmology by engaging the spiritual practices of collective study, shared liturgy, social praxis, and communal life. Some Sisters deepened their earth sensibilities through projects already in place, such as our earth-based communities at Good Earth in Ste. Anne, Manitoba, and at Gurtishall, in St. Adolphe, Manitoba.²⁷ Other Sisters became involved in local ecological action groups, like Save Our Seine (SOS) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, whose mandate is “to preserve, protect, enhance, restore and repair the Seine River greenway [. . .] raise public education and awareness [. . .] improve public access to the Seine River greenway, and to work in partnership with governmental, business and other non-profit organizations for stewardship planning of the Seine.”²⁸ More of this involvement will be described later.

The 2008 Chapter also gave impetus to the meeting outcomes of Sisters “Under 65,” which had taken place between December 2005 and 2007. At the invitation of the Province leadership, Sisters met three times to consider our collective future. For this group, “Earth” was the *context* for whatever we were to live in the future, and not only one issue among many. We named the whole Earth community as an interpretive key for the future. In a letter written to the Canadian Province on February 4, 2007, the Under 65 group wrote:

We want to live an ‘engaged cosmology:’ seeing how the new universe story deepens God’s revelation and communication with us so that we (care for) the survival (and indeed) the flourishing of the planet and all her creatures [...] This commitment to the earth is the ‘lens’ through which we want to view our life, mission, and ministry together into the unfolding future. Fr. Thomas Berry calls this holy engagement with the Earth ‘the Great Work of our times.’ We

²⁶ Carolyn McDade. *My Heart is Moved Project: Music That Guides Us Through the Narrows to a Deeper Understanding of Who We Are as Planetary and Cosmic Beings*. Carolyn McDade Music. Available at: <https://www.carolynmcdademusic.com/heart.html> Accessed January 16, 2023.

²⁷ See descriptions of the RNDMs two land-based communities of Good Earth and Gurtishall at <https://rndmcanada.org/archive/>

²⁸ “About Us,” *Save Our Seine River Environment Inc.*, November 4, 2023. <https://www.saveourseine.com/about>.

want to respond creatively to this Great Work and become more conscious
...²⁹

An Eco-Project committee was tasked to proceed with plans towards constructing an ecologically sound building, which now also included housing for 5-8 Sisters.³⁰ This building was to be ecologically innovative, e.g., it would use straw bale construction, geo-thermal heating, and solar electricity, and employ architectural means for adapting to frigid and tropical temperature extremes. Reports were given regularly to the Sisters of the Province through e-mails, regional meetings, and the Annual Assemblies. Suitable land was purchased. At an extraordinary Assembly in November 2010, the project was again endorsed with the unanimous support of those gathered, save for one dissenting vote. Despite the best efforts of leadership over that time, and the ongoing involvement and affirmation of the Sisters of the Province, this eco-project collapsed in 2011.

There are myriad perspectives on this ending. In my assessment, two primary factors paralyzed us and sent us into disarray. One was decreasing enthusiasm and increasing ambivalence about the project that grew in some Under 65 Sisters; another was a fear that arose in some Sisters. It seemed to me this fear had two faces: financial fear that we did not have the necessary resources to fund the project, and personal fear of how this project might impact individuals' lives. The Province leadership itself was divided and came to a place of impasse.³¹ The Building Committee could not get clear and timely responses from Leadership, and the stresses of this untenable quagmire were affecting the life of the Province. In the fall of 2011, the Province leadership met regionally with RNDMs in Regina and Winnipeg and proposed that the Province *not* proceed with the Eco-Project. Many still wanted to proceed, but the majority did not. The project was discontinued. In subsequent years, the Province as a whole has been largely silent about this ending.

RNDM Earth Community as an Enduring Focus

In the subsequent General Chapters of 2014 and 2020, other aspects of our common life and common home were emphasized. Both of those Chapters also harkened back to carrying forward the vision of Chapter 2008. So, in our documents and in our awareness, the dynamics of ecology and the new cosmology have remained enduring values and activating principles.³²

²⁹ Veronica Dunne, personal files.

³⁰ Housing was added as a component of this eco-project, as the principal RNDM residence in Winnipeg, was sold in 2007, necessitating different housing and administrative space.

³¹ The leadership in 2011 was composed of a group of four women, of which I was the designated leader.

³² We note that the word "ecology" has a shared root with "ecumenical" and "economics," all concerned with the needs of the household. Cosmology is a science of how the universe started, and how it is structured.

In practical terms, the Canadian Province has taken steps to financially support ecological efforts in Canada and the twenty-two countries where our Sisters live, primarily through promoting initiatives that involve tree planting, water and biodiversity advocacy, and drawing on the indigenous knowledge of local people rather than industrial societies' ways of knowing.³³ In addition, we have financially supported local and educational initiatives here in Canada.³⁴

Through all the twists and turns of time from 2008 until today, the ecological awareness of the RNDM Canadian Province (and the international Congregation) has grown, and shows itself in various green efforts around the world. At the same time, the degradation of creation continues at an alarming pace. Humans continue to treat creation as a commodity for human use; as a collection of objects rather than a community of subjects.³⁵ Unusual weather events have become regular events, and for those of us not immediately living with fire, flood, hurricane, or war, they are nonetheless splashed daily across our television screens from around the world. Humans are trashing our common home, and not enough of us recognize it to be able to hold ourselves and our governments to account. Climate is changing faster than at any time in human history, and is putting us all at risk, as is our shrinking biodiversity and our collapsing human-made systems.³⁶ And still, earth's inhabitants experience fierce resistance to change from political and financial forces; a kind of indifference the mystics named "acedia" drains life away.³⁷

Accepting Bruno-Jofré's story, that the RNDMs have made this long journey "from Ultramontane origins to a new cosmology," and noting the consistent if partial ways they have continued through with their commitments, I want to again pick up at the "new cosmology" part of the story, the universe story. This is the largest context possible, the creation story of the universe as revealed through science, pulsing with energy. Building on that story, I will suggest ways RNDMs might further respond in carrying forward our part of the RNDM story and contribute to the story of Berry's *great work*.

³³ Good examples of such local initiatives are Vandana Shiva in India (<https://www.navdanya.org/>) and Wangari Maathai in Kenya (<https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>).

³⁴ We have set aside a designated fund to make annual donations of \$30,000 to a Winnipeg group, Save Our Seine (SOS). To learn more about SOS, see <https://www.saveourseine.com/>. We have also made a significant financial contribution, along with other religious Congregations, to establishing an undergraduate degree in ecology, which will align with the present M.A. in Social Justice and Ecology at St. Paul's University in Ottawa. In addition, along with other Congregations of religious women in Winnipeg, in 2022 we made an "Impact Donation" of \$100,000 to Climate Change Connections. <http://climatechangeconnection.org>.

³⁵ To draw on Thomas Berry's oft-used phrase.

³⁶ In 2022, we are in a time of collapsing civil and social systems: education, health care, jurisprudence, governance, religious, economic, etc. I will not develop this assertion further, and these collapses are regularly documented in reputable publications.

³⁷ *Acedia* has been variously defined as listlessness, of not caring or not being concerned, of having lost the spark of life. It is named by medieval and modern spiritual writers as the "noonday demon", a soul-sickness.

In addition to Swimme and Berry's and Tucker's insights on how to live within the new universe story, I will also draw on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. To draw on these prolific scholars is to invoke a multitude, as their research has catalyzed the work of many other writers and theorists.

I first draw on Swimme and Berry's previously noted book, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. Each of the words of their title is weighted with meaning. To me it is telling that in their final acknowledgements for this book, in addition to citing the many scholars who had informed their work, Swimme and Berry wrote:

From the beginning, we regarded the articulation of a new cosmology as a task for the species as a whole. What was clear to both of us was that this story is being told by the universe—by the galaxies, by the birds, by the Earth, by the winds, by the stellar explosions, by the fossils, by the rising and falling of the mountain ranges, by the children of every species. Our primary task was to learn how to listen, and to establish rapport with others who are listening. No one person or culture or intellectual discipline by itself had the capacity to hear the full story the universe was telling.³⁸

Swimme and Berry's statement resonates deeply at this time, when a reasonable person can only conclude that our human abilities to see clearly and assess our current climate debacle are inadequate or atrophied. We need a larger frame, unfiltered by the biases of toxic nationalism, and our current industrial/consumer society dominated by the myth of progress and endless economic growth on a finite planet. We need to come to know ourselves at the most fundamental level as cosmological beings, an integral part of the evolving story of the universe. In other words, to allow our consciousness to be transformed.

A Question of Story

How are we to live this new awareness? As previously indicated, for Swimme and Berry, living a new cosmology is all a question of story. We are in trouble just now, they say, because we do not have a good story; we are in between stories. The old story of how the world came into existence and how we fit into it is not functioning for humans in a meaningful way, and we have not yet adequately learned the new story. The old story sustained us for a very long time. "It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with a life purpose, and energized action. It made meaning of suffering and integrated our knowing. We awoke in the morning and knew who and where we were."³⁹

³⁸ Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*. 295.

³⁹ Thomas Berry, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values," *Teilhard Studies* 1 (Winter 1978): 14.

The new story of the universe, they say, is a bio-spiritual story as well as a galactic story and an Earth story where each being in the universe is needed by the entire universe. Swimme and Tucker write in a similar mode:

With our empirical observations expanded by modern science, we are now realizing that our universe is a single immense energy event that began as a tiny speck that has unfolded over time to become galaxies and stars, palms and pelicans, the music of Bach, and each of us alive today. The [. . .] universe is not simply a place but a story—a story in which we are immersed, to which we belong, and out of which we arose.⁴⁰

This story has the power to awaken us more deeply to who we are. Just as the Milky Way is the universe in the form of a galaxy, and an orchid is the universe in the form of a flower, we are the universe in the form of a human, and the RNDMs are the universe in the form of a religious order. “And every time we are drawn to look up into the night sky and reflect on the awesome beauty of the universe, we are actually the universe reflecting on itself . . .”⁴¹

Thomas Berry’s story of his experience as a boy, like Tomson Highway’s earlier story, is instructive. In “The Meadow Across the Creek” Berry names an experience of creation that shaped his whole life.⁴² I believe that each of us has had a comparable experience when we were “present” in creation, and “something happened” that was formative for us. Remembering that “something” may release new vigour and purpose in living. I will not repeat Berry’s story here but urge the reader to read it in hope that it will recall your own experience(s) as a young person when you were surprised by life and beauty. Berry’s story begins with the evocative words, “I was a young person then, some eleven years old...”

This experience shaped Berry’s life, giving him a deep anchor for his visionary work in presenting the story of the universe and a north star for his life. As he says, “Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive.”⁴³ It is that kind of insight and energy on which humans need to draw to create a future full of hope.

⁴⁰ Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (Yale University Press: 2011), 1-2.

⁴¹ Center for the Story of the Universe. <https://storyoftheuniverse.org/books/journey-of-the-universe/>. Accessed November 17, 2022.

⁴² “The Meadow Across the Creek,” in Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 12-14. <https://thomasberry.org/the-meadow-across-the-creek/>

⁴³ Berry, *Ibid.*

Conclusion

I began this exploration thinking that reliable and readily accessible climate information would impel more humans to climate advocacy. Through a tapestry of stories, including the RNDM story of embracing a new cosmology, I conclude that beyond our good and necessary actions we need a still-deeper shift in consciousness commensurate with the new context and challenges in which we find ourselves. Humans are the densest collection of complex information the universe has so far evolved (as far as we know). As human activity gives rise to even greater complexity, some scholars (Teilhard de Chardin in the forefront) theorize that an intensification of human consciousness is the next step of human evolution.⁴⁴ I have come to conclude that we urgently need to cooperate with that evolution if our species is to survive.

As Swimme and Berry, and Tucker, have noted, the ways we usually think about ourselves (our professions, nationalities, religions, politics, etc.), while valid, are too small for the challenges we face and the times in which we live. We need to take as our context the universe, and specifically the universe as planet Earth, on which humans presently have a habitable home. The way we think of ourselves in our context determines the future we will shape. As Swimme has rhetorically asked, would the universe labour for 13.8 billion years just to create consumers?⁴⁵

Increasingly, we need to think of ourselves as cosmological beings. We need to enable the creative powers of the universe to advance in us a more mutually enhancing way of being. Awakening our imagination to the complexity of the universe, with a humility that acknowledges we barely understand this complexity, creates a space of possibility.

While consciousness has been complexifying all through the evolutionary journey of the universe, and creating reflexive self-consciousness in humans, shifts in consciousness in humans are not automatic.⁴⁶ Humans today are shaped by a military/industrial/consumer system that filters out awareness of the profound changes necessary to change our behaviour. Thus, the great work needs to be grounded in our larger identities and purposes as cosmic/earth beings, and Berry's maxim serves as a sure focus: earth is primary and humans are derivative. The universe is alive, and we are alive in it, an extension of its incredible intensity and

⁴⁴ William Ockham. "The Noosphere (Part I): Teilhard de Chardin's Vision". Posted August 13, 2013. Available at: <https://teihard.com/2013/08/13/the-noosphere-part-i-teihard-de-chardins-vision/>

⁴⁵ This comment stays with me from his video series, *The Powers of the Universe*. Available at: <https://storyoftheuniverse.org/power-of-the-universe/>.

⁴⁶ Teilhard de Chardin describes this complexifying consciousness as the Noosphere. I will not develop this further except to say that contemporary writers are furthering the idea that the planet needs a thoughtful mind, a Noosphere "to deal with its most daunting challenges: it needs to better manage the geosphere (e.g., climate change), the biosphere (e.g., biodiversity loss), while at the same time enabling humans to become globally intelligent and to flourish together with technology. Matter, life, and mind (both human and technological) need to work as a coherent and evolving system, as a whole." See Clément Vidal. "What is the Noosphere?" Available at: <https://humanenergy.io/projects/what-is-the-noosphere/>. Accessed December 5, 2022.

creativity. “Awareness that the universe is more Cosmogogenesis than cosmos might be the greatest change in human consciousness that has taken place since the awakening of the human mind in the Paleolithic period.”⁴⁷

I close with one last story of awakened consciousness, that of Apollo 9 astronaut Rusty Schweickart’s account of his repeated orbits of earth.⁴⁸ From outer space, Schweickart came to recognize himself differently. He went into space as an American and returned to earth as a global citizen. He saw himself as an extension of the sensory capacity of the human and saw earth as an indivisible whole. He writes in a casual, conversational tone:

[...] up there you go around every hour and a half, time after time after time. And you wake up usually in the mornings, just the way the track of your orbit goes, over the Middle East and over North Africa. As you eat breakfast you look out the window as you're going past, and there's the Mediterranean area, Greece and Rome and North Africa and the Sinai [...] the cradle of civilization. And you go down across North Africa and out over the Indian Ocean and look up at that great subcontinent of India pointed down toward you as you go past it [...] and up across that monstrous Pacific Ocean [...] And you finally come up across the coast of California, and you look for those friendly things, Los Angeles [...] And there's Houston, there's home [...] and you look and sure enough there's the Astrodome—and you identify with that, it's an attachment.

And on across New Orleans and then you look down to the south and there's the whole peninsula of Florida laid out. And all the hundreds of hours you've spent flying across that route down in the atmosphere [...] And you go out across the Atlantic and back across Africa, and you do it again and again and again.

[...] And the next thing you recognize in yourself is that you're identifying with North Africa—you look forward to that, you anticipate it, and there it is. And that whole process of what it is you identify with begins to shift. When you go around the Earth in an hour and a half, you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing.

And that makes a change [...] There you are—hundreds of people in the Mid-East killing each other over some imaginary line that you're not even aware of, that you can't see. And from where you see it, the thing is a whole, and it's so beautiful. You wish you could take one in each hand, one from each side in the various conflicts, and say, 'Look. Look at it from this perspective. Look at that. What's important?'

⁴⁷ Berry. *The Great Work*, 190.

⁴⁸ Russell L. Schweickart. “No Frames, No Boundaries” (originally published in *Earth's Answer*, (Lindisfarne Books/Harper & Row, 1977). Presented at the 1974 Lindisfarne Conference. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4kw8sxkm> .

Schweickart goes on to say: “[...] And you realize [...] that you’ve changed [...] I had experienced the earth in a way that I had no way to describe. I had experienced the *aliveness* of it—of it all.”

At the workshop’s conclusion, when someone spontaneously asked him what it was like “up there,” Schweickart paused for a long time and when he finally spoke, simply said, “It’s like seeing a baby about to be born”⁴⁹

Something is afoot in the universe. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. “But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation.”⁵⁰ All the stories in this paper give us hints and guesses of the immensity in which we are immersed, the transformation of consciousness to which we are summoned, and the Great Work before us all.

⁴⁹ Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. (New York. Currency Doubleday, 1990). 370-371.

⁵⁰ Berry, *The Great Work*. 175.