

## The Forum

# Letters to the Editor

*Letter, dated July 26, 2008, from Mike Bell concerning "Where is the Universe in the Universe Story" by Herman Greene (TE 1)*

Dear Herman,

Thanks for offering me the chance to comment on your essay, "Where is the Universe in the Universe Story?" I found it quite interesting and very stimulating.

This essay raises many issues about Berry and Swimme's thinking. In some areas I agree with your interpretation of their thinking; in others I suggest the need for further clarification; and in still others I disagree with your interpretation.

What I'll try and do is list the issues one by one, generally working my way down through the essay.

1. *You mention that you have problems about the importance of the Universe Story in bringing about change.*

Though you mention that the Universe Story has had a very positive effect on many lives, you don't deal directly with the inability of the Universe Story to effect change, nor give us any evidence of its inability to bring about real change. If this point is important for you, you might give us some examples of where it has failed to bring about change.

2. *You expand on the first point by your mentioning experience with Dr.*

*Knitter.* He describes the Universe Story as a Meta-Narrative. I can't tell whether you agree with him or not, nor do I understand whether this is an illustration of your first point—the inability of the Universe Story to affect change across cultures as a meta-narrative. As it now stands, the story of your discussion with Dr. Knitter illustrates how you began to have doubts about the Universe Story.

But it becomes a bit of a red herring in terms of you overall theme without a more direct application to the Universe Story. Allow me a personal reflection.

As you know, I've spent most of my adult life working with aboriginal folks in the Arctic regions of northern Canada, and continue to do so. (I'm currently involved with the Tlicho (Dogrib) people helping them develop their cosmology so they can use it as a guide to in developing their self-government.) The Inuit, the Tlicho and other northern Dene peoples have their own, distinct cosmologies. All cosmologies are culturally driven. So the real question is whether there is such a thing as a universal meta-cosmology. I don't think there is. And I don't think that Berry and Swimme say there is. (They are not saying, for example, that the cosmology expressed in the Universe story will become *the* common cosmology for the whole world.) But I do think they are saying that in our modern world all cosmologies, to retain their relevance, have to address the realities of modern science. If they don't, their children who are watching television, are going to treat their origin stories just like Disney fairy tales. Though I have no statistical evidence for this, I think the response of some aboriginal communities and the acceptance of Berry's thought in different parts of the world would indicate that it has some ability to speak across cultures.

As for Knitter's thought that people can be united by "common ethical callings" around major problems, this is a whole other matter. After years of observing and participating in struggles between aboriginal communities, corporations and governments in such issues as mines, pipelines, extractive resource development, hunting rights and environmental protection, I have come to appreciate the importance of negotiating not on the basis of problems or issues, but on the basis of common interests and common ground. And, as my friend Tom Keevey, likes to say, those who are seeking a common ground in terms of their self interests must begin by realizing that they are standing on it.

3. ***You have concerns about basing the Universe Story on the Big Bang and you go into this quite extensively.*** First of all I don't think Berry and Swimme base their story on the Big Bang or use it as *the foundation* of the Universe Story or of their cosmology. Though they use the Big Bang to help illustrate the Universe Story, they see science as changing (as you have pointed out). So the lengthy discussion on the big bang, while interesting, is not to the point. Cosmology, which is the point, existed long before science. Berry has continually stated that science is not a cosmology. What is important is that critical reflection must also include reflection on current science, whatever that might be.
4. ***There seems to be a real ambivalence or confusion in regard to science in general.*** In the first part of your paper you seem to indicate that the Universe Story places too much emphasis on the importance of science. You mention in the middle of your essay, "*It seems to me that the statement that the Universe Story is based on empirical science, especially those parts pertaining to the early uni-*

*verse, is misleading.*" But I see this as a straw-man. I may be mistaken here but I don't think Berry and Swimme made such a statement. If someone else has said it—for example other members of the Berry community—it should be referenced. Interestingly the next part of the paper seems to recognize the importance of science in explaining the Universe Story.

Toward the end you indicate "*These insights, (derived in part from modern scientific revelation), . . . form a foundation for understanding the universe and our place in it even as our scientific knowledge of the universe continues to develop and change. These foundational insights are the new cosmology. They are the universe in the universe story.*"

After making this statement, you seem to switch back again: you refer to the danger of intermixing contemporary scientific understanding and philosophic understandings in telling the story as a narrative. And you follow this by stressing that you start your telling of story of the universe with the physical universe (presumably using science and, I would suggest timelines) and go beyond it to talk about meaning and value.

Herman this is a key area where either you are not explaining the relationship between physical science and the Universe Story—or I'm just not getting it. It might be a bit of both.

5. ***You express a concern that the Universe Story overshadows the Ecozoic Era,*** but you give no examples. Some specific examples would be helpful. I know this is a real concern of yours and I think there might be a logical explanation. The Ecozoic is part of the Universe Story but it is the end part—the part that is still emerging. We know very little about it in practical terms compared to the preceding part—say the Cenozoic Era. So the story of the Ecozoic is still in its infancy. It is going to be "over-

shadowed" by the rest of the Universe Story—but that is quite natural and is not meant to slight the Ecozoic. To use an example, it is much easier for historians to tell us the story of America since 1776 than it is for them to tell us about the historical significance of the two terms of George W. Bush. So if they write books on the history of America since 1776, most of it is going to "overshadow" the current administration.

6. *You indicate that it is important to sort out the parts of the Universe Story that are important to the Ecozoic Era.* This part I don't understand. You note that the Universe Story is an integral telling of the story of the universe and Berry's thought is integral—his work cannot be divided up into distinct subdivisions. But then you try and divide it up by indicating that some parts—which remain for the most part nameless as far as I can see—are needed to explain the Ecozoic society. I think it is possible to distinguish *intellectually* the Ecozoic part of the Universe Story from the earlier parts of the Universe Story, but they are they are both parts of the same story. So, though I can distinguish between the beginning, middle and end of any story, I think it is impossible to say this part relates specifically to the Ecozoic and this other part doesn't relate to the Ecozoic. Here I think the danger is the problem that arises from reductionism.
7. *The preference for a philosophical cosmology of the universe story.* You complain that the real problem with the Universe Story is the mix of science with philosophy—and you prefer philosophy. But the reality seems to be that, according to Anne Marie Dalton and most everyone else including yourself (I suspect), there is no real comprehensive philosophy in the Universe Story. There was never intended to be. The telling of the

story is "the philosophy." What you see is what you get. You seem to believe that while the science is ever changing the philosophy is somehow unchanging or universal and not susceptible to the kinds of changes that science is susceptible to. Given the number of philosophers down through human history and the number around today who disagree with one another, I would disagree your assumption.

8. *The issue of the meaning of "integral" in "the integral telling of the story of the universe."* In footnote 29 you indicate that the interpretation given to the Universe Story in *Evening Thoughts* is inaccurate or at least contradictory. Since Thomas Berry is the author of *Evening Thoughts*, and this is his latest book, I find this comment a bit presumptuous. For most of us, the time lapse between Thomas Berry's work in Riverdale, New York and his work on *Evening Thoughts* would suggest that his thinking had developed over time. But this is not your interpretation. If I reviewed, say, three drafts of this paper, I would take the final draft as your final word. But you don't do this in the case of the first principle in *Evening Thoughts* and you don't explain why. In light of the comments you have made about "inaccurate and contradictory," it would be helpful if you did.

When you make reference to "the integral telling of the story" in *Evening Thoughts* I don't assume, as you do, that the word "story" refers just to the physical universe. I assume that, in using the word integral, Berry is referring to science, myths, dreams, arts, culture—all aspects of the human enterprise. The whole point of an "integral story" is that it can embrace all aspects of critical reflection and shared dream experience. I think this interpretation is consistent with what he has said elsewhere. He has always

indicated that the story has been known by indigenous peoples long before modern science. When he indicates that, the Twentieth Century is the first time the *“story has been known with scientific precision through empirical observation”* he is not saying that **The Story** is, in essence, **the scientific story**. He is saying that this is the first time the story, known from time in memoriam among indigenous peoples, has also become known *through a new mode of knowing—modern science*.

Herman, in conclusion, here is the way I see it.

There are two great elements to Berry’s thought: the Universe Story and the Ecozoic Era. They are intimately linked and must be integrally consistent. They are both part of the same cosmology. Together they are more than the sum of their individual parts

Berry and Swimme see certain benefits to linking their cosmology in some way to modern science which is not a cosmology in itself. Science has a role to play both in the Universe Story and

in the creation of the Ecozoic Era. Critical reflection demands that the reflection include a reflection on the role of science—whatever science, which is always changing, has to say at any given time.

There is symbiotic relationship between science and cosmology. There is also a symbiotic relationship between philosophy and cosmology. Because the Universe Story and the Ecozoic Era are integral to one another, we cannot use a reductionist approach in our analysis, nor can we use a deficit model to guide our reasoning. The real challenge is not figuring out what’s wrong with the concept of the Universe Story, or what’s wrong with the concept of the Ecozoic Era. The real challenge is how to join the two together in an integral approach.

This may be overly simplistic—but this is the way I see it.

As ever,

Mike