

The New Story

Nancy Carnes

Nancy Carnes is a Franciscan who for the past six years has been studying cosmology and practicing conversion and eco-penitence. She has led interfaith “Making a Difference” workshops for the Mastery Foundation and now serves as a facilitator for the Pachamama Symposium, “Awakening the Dreamer.” She has a degree in Forestry, has worked mostly in medical administration and publishing, and has been an avid backpacker, canoer (both whitewater and boundary waters), rock-climber and caver. She hopes to find and join a community where she can participate in and help promote local organic farming.

Thomas seemed like such a quiet, unassuming man as I sat across from him in the nursing home and as I watched the interviews with him that the Pachamama Alliance included in their “Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium.” Yet the more I contemplate the new cosmology he so consistently and deeply points to with his writings, thoughts, and life, the more I wonder at the breadth of his vision and the potential of his gift to open up a sustainable future. While that sustainable future is still up to us to manifest and it is not assured that we will succeed, I believe it would have been extremely improbable without his gift.

I see his contribution, along with that of Brian Swimme, to be of equal if not greater scope as Galileo’s refutation of a flat Earth as the center of the cosmos. Now we are refuting the cosmology of separate human beings as the center of the cosmos. Why is this shift in cosmology so important?

What we do correlates with how the world occurs to us.¹ If we see a stick in the road and we think it is a snake that we fear, we will act like it is that snake. If we are of a particular religion and we have been taught to fear members of other religions, even though rarely do our own religions present a fair and adequate treatment of what other religions believe, we will act accordingly. If we think humans are superior to other species with rights to use other life forms and the elements necessary to sustain them without consideration, we will act accordingly. Our unexamined assumptions will continue to determine our direction, often with disastrous and unintentional consequences.

For global sustainability to be a possibility, we need a story that includes everything in a comprehensive wholeness. Ideas of an enlightened stewardship still based on old cosmologies, or stories, of superiority and separateness will not go far enough. As Thomas Berry, a cultural historian, said, “We will be alienated from the universe until we have a story, an adequate story of the universe that tells the story of the human as well as the story of everything else, because it is part of one single process that has been going through a sequence of transformative episodes.”²

For the first time in history, a new story is arising that tells the story of the human as part of a single process with everything else, that includes all humanity and all life, that is supported by and continues to be shaped by science. It is called the Universe Story, and has been recounted beautifully by mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in their book, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—a Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*.³

Our bodies contain the same elements as that of all life, the same elements that came into being originally in the formation of the stars. As Brian Swimme shares, “The Universe Story shows how profoundly related we are. It shows that we are involved with each other and have been for

¹ Steve Zafron and Dave Logan, *The Three Laws of Performance: Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Warren Bennis Series, 2009).

² Thomas Berry, interview in *Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium*, Pachamama Alliance, 2008.

³ 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, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

a long time. So it is not the case that the Earth was assembled and then we were added to the Earth, and it was there for our purposes. Rather, we came out of the Earth.⁴

The implications are profound. There is the possibility of a greater unity of spirituality and science in our exploration of reality, a deepening of our understanding of our own faith traditions and others in respectful dialogue rather than in isolation, and a restoration of meaning to those areas of our faith and work and daily life that might have lacked connection. Up to now, there has not been a congruent cosmology, a unifying story, out of which actions that support global sustainability can emerge.

To profoundly contemplate the idea that we are the universe in human form shifts our identity and thus our relationship to everything. What we do to any part of the universe becomes what we do to ourselves.

Brian Swimme captures the immensity of it:

As we move into this understanding, we have a new identity of ourselves as cosmological beings. We're not just Americans, we're not just French, we're not just Democrats. We're not any small category. We are the universe in the form of a human. And it is true of everyone. It's an amazing new understanding of ourselves that is so profoundly inclusive and everyone is part of this. Everything is part of this, and we discover as well a profound kinship. That no matter what being we're talking about on the planet, we are related. We are related in terms of energy. We're related in terms of genetics. We're all in one way or another like a form of kin and that just—it's overwhelming. So it's just now coming into human awareness. It's going to take a lot of reflection to embody this fully, but it is a massive change, in human consciousness.⁵

Whether we as individuals subscribe to this story of profound interconnection or not, this story is beginning to shape the consciousness on our planet. Theologians, philosophers, and scientists are currently working to help deepen our understanding of this new cosmology. And it creates new possibilities for a future that is different from our past.

I now consider myself an eco-penitent proclaiming the good news that we can come into right relationship with all of creation and each other. My heart overflows with gratitude for Thomas Berry, who helped me find a new way of being in the world that is a source of so much hope and joy.

⁴ Brian Swimme, interview in *Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium*, Pachamama Alliance, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.