

An Evolving Cosmology: A Swamp Yankee Journeys to the Center

BY FRED LANPHEAR

My cosmology, or story of the universe and my place in it, has been evolving as has the universe. Although I didn't even know what the word meant as I was growing up, I did have a worldview and a story about the way life is, which had assumptions that informed my relationships and my life decisions. My changing story has been greatly influenced by the societal worldviews of my circle of relationships at specific times on my journey, as well by my life experiences.

I will describe how my cosmology has evolved through four phases of my life, following the Hindu tradition of designating life phases, and I have added a fifth to capture how I perceive consciousness to continue after the physical death of the body. In each of the four phases, I describe the nature of my life situation and my perception or understanding of the universe, including how I define my spiritual views and life purpose along with the scope and nature of my relationships.

Phase I. (0–21 yrs.)

I was born into a family of Swamp Yankees¹ in a seacoast summer resort in southern Rhode Island nine generations after my early ancestors walked off the boat in 1669. Of French Huguenot roots, my ancestral lineage has been deeply entrenched in Seventh Day or American Baptist traditions since arriving in America. I grew up in a post-depression working class family. My backyard for the first six years of life was a salt-water marsh, but I was in walking distance of beautiful beaches at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. I moved five miles to the family farmstead when I was six where I lived for the next 15 years while receiving my elementary, secondary and undergraduate education.

My world experience took place within the regional geography of the Northeast, particularly the New England states. However, through my education, I knew that there were other continents across the spacious ocean. World War II made this realization quite clear to me since my older brother was in the army in Europe. I also knew there were planets and stars galore in the spacious sky that became visible as our special star, the sun, became obscure as planet Earth rotates so that the sun is hidden on its opposite side. My scope of the galaxies was the visible canopy of the nighttime sky characterized by the Milky Way.

The American Baptist Church I attended, along with my family and peers, was instrumental in shaping my spiritual understanding and place in the universe. During this phase of life, my early childhood image was of a two-story universe with a heaven and earth along with a supernatural creator God. This shifted later in the initial phase of life to embrace a spiritual dimension of my earthly existence with the notion of God as a divine force involved in the creation and ongoing activities of the world. At the center of my spiritual understanding (faith) was a focus on the life and teachings of Jesus as a way of knowing the nature of God. I strongly identified with Jesus as a model to emulate and found a sense of purpose in striving to live my life according to my understanding of the values and practices ascribed to him in the scriptures.

Native Americans have ways of honoring all species, not just the two-legged humans, by being present to all living creatures as well as the inanimate world. They refer to these as "all my relations" If you had asked me at this time in my life who was included in "all my

¹ Swamp Yankee is a colloquialism that refers to long-term residents (Northeasterners with colonial ancestry) from southern Rhode Island, nearby eastern Connecticut and southeastern Massachusetts. Their attributes include being countrified, stubborn, independent, with little formal education and no desire to augment it. A bias I grew up with that has been associated with the Swamp Yankee is resentment of the wealthy that came from out of state and purchased prime local property to build summer homes.

relations" it would have been a rather limited "short list" and with a rank of importance that began with the family at the center with concentric rings of human groupings based on geography, religious and ethnic connections, and even economic and political biases. I was living a rather insular life in the initial phase of my life.

Phase II. (22–35 yrs.)

At the completion of my undergraduate education at the University of Rhode Island, I moved to State College, Pennsylvania, where I began a five-year graduate program at Penn State and the next leap in my journey of consciousness. Living in a college town was quite different. I was continually being confronted with new challenges to some of my traditional worldviews and religious assumptions and practices. I encountered foreign students at church, as fellow graduate students, and as apartment residents with whom I shared a bathroom. I immersed myself in my studies and research. I received my Ph.D. in Horticultural Science and became an assistant professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. For another nine years, I was immersed in science and academics and rose through the ranks to full professorship at the end of my eighth year.

I was steeped in the scientific paradigm with confidence that research and technology would ultimately provide answers and solutions to the most perplexing problems facing humanity. While my focus at Purdue was primarily research, I found I was equally drawn to teaching. Academia was both challenging and fulfilling. This was also a time in my life for raising a family. We had three children and built our first home in the suburbs. My spatial world did not radically expand in this phase of my life except through my intellectual pursuits. In fact, my research focus tended to reduce my scope or worldview to a more reduced, cellular and even molecular perspective.

In State College, I connected to a Baptist Church that provided a connection and continuation of Phase I. I married my life partner, Nancy, at the completion of my Masters degree, who joined me and brought both familiarity and complexities to my life. When

we moved to West Lafayette to begin my academic career, we immediately connected to a local church that merged Baptist and Disciples congregations. This was during the '60s, a challenging time for the United States and the church. There was growing social unrest around civil rights and the Viet Nam war. I became involved in a movement that was challenging the churches to become present and compassionate to the innocent suffering in the world. It was a trying time for the church as its traditional theology was being called into question by secular forces of science and the human potential movement. My life's work in this phase was to teach, research and advance landscape horticulture. My spiritual path was still shaped by Christianity with a major focus on social activism and church renewal.

"All my relations" did not expand greatly during this phase of my life. It was different from the community I grew up with, primarily Anglo-Saxon with a few individuals of color, ethnic and religious background that exposed the narrowness of my cultural setting. We strongly identified with the civil rights movement and took every opportunity to support it and identify with it.

Phase III. (36–56 yrs.)

I experienced a vocational-crisis when I was 36. My life took a radical shift from academia to social activism. It was following the turmoil of the '60's that I experienced a "call" to engage in changing the world. The extent to which I changed the world is debatable, but there is no question about the change that occurred in me during this time in my life.

My family was invited to join the staff of the Order Ecumenical, a secular-religious order with a mission of teaching the new theology of the 20th Century and renewing the church to care for the world. We left the comforts of academia and suburbia to live communally in some challenging living conditions around the world. Our children came with us reluctantly. It was a time of deepening our existential understanding of our faith and a radical engagement with the church and social structures of society. Both of us continued to be employed while being fully

appropriately placed needles in overcoming medical issues for which Western medicine is ineffective. Overcoming skepticism and resistance by scientists and medical practitioners who were unwilling to consider this 3000 year-old medicine to have scientific validity, I worked diligently to bring this form of medicine into the mainstream. I employed Western science to apply rigorous experimental protocol to establish the validity of this “exotic” medicine. Gradually, the doors are being opened to the benefits of this form of complementary medicine.

The book that had the greatest impact on laying the foundation for my evolving worldview in this phase of my life was *The Dream of the Earth* by Thomas Berry.² It was a paradigm shift for me, from an anthropocentric to a biocentric way of viewing the world. I discovered that the context of human development that had been the focus of my life was too small. An equally mind-expanding book was *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry.³ A sequence of other books that I discovered rather synchronistically, have contributed to the framework, substance and choice of language and metaphors to describe my current cosmology. They include:

- *The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin⁴
- *The Planetary Mind* by Arne A. Wyller⁵
- *The Spark of Life: Darwin and the Primeval Soup* by Christopher Will and Jeffrey Bada⁶
- *A Walk Through Time* by Sidney Liebes, Elisabet Sahtouris and Brian Swimme⁷
- *Radical Nature* by Christian deQuincy⁸
- *Evolutions Arrow* by John Stewart⁹
- *The View from the Center of the Universe: Discovering Our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos* by Joel R. Pimack and Nancy Ellen Abrams¹⁰
- *Cosmology and Creation* by Paul Brockelman¹¹

The events that shaped my worldview are too many to enumerate, but the nature of

these will help inform the source and type of their influence. The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) was an organization that was profoundly important as I strove to integrate science and spirituality. It also provided alternative perspectives on spirituality than that provided by the institutional church and other religions. The Center for Ecozoic Studies (CES) provided an opportunity to delve into the implications of Thomas Berry’s writings and to express my own emerging perspective. Connection with Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow’s traveling ministry to tell the great story (see www.thegreatstory.org) has enriched my understanding of the universe story and the evolutionary journey we are on. Participation in an EarthSpirit Rising Conference and a post-conference Council of Earth Elders in 2005 introduced me to my current Earth Elder path.

It has been a time of integrating life experiences, worldviews, and emerging perspectives into my current cosmology. I have been opened to new spiritual practices, from East and West. It was also a time for letting go of old patterns, such as of switching to organic gardening. I skeptically confronted my reliance on the reductionistic form of my science experience and became less doctrinal about science, recognizing that it had some of the same arrogance and rigidity that has plagued religion throughout the ages.

Each of us, as part of the latest evolutionary innovation of human consciousness, is beckoned to reflect on our beginnings, our endings, and that which gives meaning to the journey. The God-like qualities that are within each of us, beckons us to be conscious co-creators of the evolving universe. Being present to the planetary crisis, the next evolutionary leap requires an innovation in collective consciousness that propels us into new levels of cooperation to draw upon the wisdom of nature, to design and operate in concert with the natural world.

We are the universe becoming conscious of itself. As reflective beings, we are aware that we are on a spiritual journey. We are exploring a multitude of pathways to understand and celebrate that which gives meaning to our unique role in the evolutionary journey.

² Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

³ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). A new translation of this work is available. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), a new edition and translation of *Le Phénomène Humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber.

⁵ Arne A. Wyller, *The Planetary Mind* (San Francisco, CA: MacAdam/Cage Publishing, 1996).

⁶ Christopher Will and Jeffrey Bada, *The Spark of Life: Darwin and the Primeval Soup* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 2000).

⁷ Sidney Liebes, Elisabet Sahtouris, Brian Swimme, *A Walk Through Time: From Stardust to Us—The Evolution of Life on Earth* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1998)

⁸ Christian deQuincy, *Radical Nature* (Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press, 2002)

⁹ Evolutions Arrow by John Stewart, *Evolution’s Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity* (Denver, CO: Chapman Press, 2000)

¹⁰ Joel R. Pimack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from the Center of the Universe: Discovering Our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007)

¹¹ Paul Brockelman, *Cosmology and Creation: The Spiritual Significance of Contemporary Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Many gaps in the understanding of our beginnings as well as the natural processes of our evolutionary journey have been revealed through the contributions of science and the unfolding universe story. This new story can be the overarching, common story that unites us as a species, that relates and connects us to all that is. Each of us, from our individual and/or collective faith perspective, has the opportunity of integrating and revising our faith statements, which we stand before and commit to, based on this new cosmology.

In regards to my spiritual views and practices during this phase. I initially distanced myself from the institutional church for about 12 years while immersing myself in books about religion, such as *The Battle for God*¹² and *The Great Transformation*¹³ by Karen Armstrong, *Beyond Belief*¹⁴ by Elaine Pagels, *The Heart of Christianity*¹⁵ by Marcus Borg, and *Encountering God*¹⁶ by Diana Eck. It has become clear to me that the church and society is going through a transformation similar to the Axial Age described by Karen Armstrong in *The Great Transformation*. It was with this context that my wife and I joined a progressive United Church of Christ congregation two years ago. It was a church that we experienced as being on the edge of redefining a relevant new role for Christianity. We have decided that we want to be involved in this transformation and ongoing description of the evolving God. I believe the historic church continues to be a relevant laboratory in which this can take place.

Laying the contextual foundation for “greening” the congregation, I have led two discussion courses on Elders as Earthkeepers. I have introduced *The Dream of the Earth* and the universe story to the congregation from the open pulpit. I believe that our congregation, as well as others, are or will soon be receptive to exploring a new role for religion in the post-modern world as Ken Wilber projects in one of his recent books *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*.¹⁷ This transformation in religion is an aspect of the evolutionary journey and unfolding universe story. It is one element of my current life’s purpose that can be best

described as caring for Earth as an Earth Elder (see www.earthelders.org) while participating in the second great transformation.

“All my relations” has evolved to recognizing my kinship and intimate relationship with all the creatures of Earth, current and pre-historic. The great challenge is internalizing this relationship, where it becomes experienced from the heart and not just my intellect. Creating and using story, songs and rituals that celebrate our connections with the natural world is a major effort of Earth Elders and my own journey towards embodying this new relationship to all that is.

Phase V (75+ or—to infinity)

Although I do not believe in a literal heaven or hell, I find myself anticipating a disembodied extension of consciousness when my physical body, including my brain, dies. It is not a denial of my mortality or even a longing to continue to exist in some spiritual form that informs this notion. Instead, it is being present to the accumulated psychic evidence from near-death experiences (NDE), past-life phenomenon, and instrumental transcommunication (ITC), or recordings of allegedly discarnate spirit. The research on these phenomena has shifted from claims from parlor séances to rigorously conducted research projects in university settings.¹⁸ For now, we can either accept or reject anecdotal evidence.

For most of my life, I have considered this a topic of interest, but not one that has been a focus of concern. Perhaps it was related to a denial of my impending mortality, or at least within a time frame that was worth dwelling on. However, having been diagnosed with ALS and now facing my death within the next 3–5 years, it becomes a topic that is more germane. The whole notion of consciousness and how it manifests itself in living and non-living matter, is a topic of extreme importance. Unraveling the mystery of consciousness will contribute to our understanding of whether the notion of a planetary layer of thinking substance or consciousness (Noosphere), as proposed by Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*, has validity.

¹² Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

¹³ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2007).

¹⁴ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2004).

¹⁵ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

¹⁶ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003)

¹⁷ Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston, MA: Integral Books, 2006).

¹⁸ “Death: Window to the Infinite,” *Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness*, Issue 17, December 2007–February 2008.