

## New Story, New Life

*By Jim Berry*

**M**y brother, Thomas Berry, has written and spoken a good deal on the meaning of things. I think the overall direction his thoughts take was pretty well summed up in one of his essays called “*The New Story*.” That essay started out with this paragraph:

*It's all a question of story; we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not yet learned the new story. Our traditional story of the universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and we knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime and punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. It did not necessarily make people good, nor did it take away the pains and stupidities of life or make for unfailing warmth in human associations. It did provide a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner.*

That one paragraph, it seems to me, has set the pattern for the rest of his life and work which has been to put together a story which would provide for all the inhabitants of the world a satisfactory account for how things came to be and how we fit in. A story that provides not only an answer for the questions of our children, but one that answers our own questions. A story that shapes our emotional attitudes, integrates knowledge and provides a context in which life can function in a meaningful manner.

So for several years Thomas worked with a cosmological physicist named Brian Swimme, and the two of them wrote a book called *The Universe Story*, which they have proposed is a satisfactory explanation for what is and how it came to be that way. I am going to give you a very brief outline of it. But before going into that, it is necessary to say something about the old story that has brought us to where we are.

## How has the Old Story Failed

What's wrong with the old story? Well, to begin with, it fails to place the human in the context out of which the human derives. We are anthropocentric, human-centered. We see ourselves as apart from nature. Separate from it. Superior to it. The only creature of importance—as that being from which all other things derive importance as they serve humans. It is this belief that permits us to exploit creation to the degree that we are killing ecosystems and ruining those very things upon which we depend for life. We have turned to insanity, as Theodore Roszak understands the word. We destroy our own habitat. The story we live by does not stand the test of

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being a story in which we can find the guidance required to establish a system for living, which will promise an ongoing decent survival for our descendants. Some of us, and that included Thomas and me, came to believe that the old story emphasized redemption/salvation to the point that creation was so neglected as to be forgotten. While creation is the context of our lives and the source of it and the support for it, we have ignored it and exploited it. We did this out of ignorance. No one could have known that Earth was as fragile as it is, nor as subject to damage by puny humans as it is. But

it is now borne in upon us that human work has already succeeded in destroying ecosystems and species and wilderness on a huge scale and the continuation of that destructive pattern is ongoing. Rising numbers of ecologists and ecological organizations shout every day within our hearing. We have to change our ways if our descendants are to have a decent world to live in.

Those voices may be speaking out of fear for the consequences of human endeavors. And there is good reason for that.

But what is needed is the voice of religion speaking out of love for Creation, love of God and fear of God. Thomas once told me that the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. Are we not to be afraid of the anger of God that humans are applying human work to a production/consumption life style which is making the magnificent wilderness into deserts, that we are fishing the oceans into barrenness and doing other unspeakable things to the

beautiful and life-nourishing and self-maintaining ecosystems the universe system took so many millions and billions of years to evolve?

And so, we must find a new story. What might it be?

## The New Story

Once upon a time, a long, long, long time ago in a place far, far, far away, there was a primordial flaring forth, an energy event so huge that only the mind of God could conceive of it or comprehend it. It was fifteen billion years ago and the energy which set that event in motion is the same energy that posers the universe today. We know this happened because we can trace the stars and the galaxies back on the paths they have traveled at the speeds we know that they traveled and amazingly they all get back to a common point at about the same time.

In the first fractions of a second, the particles stabilized and then the primal nuclei formed. Then the galactic clouds formed, then the galaxies by the billions—clusters of galaxies occur and super clusters of a thousand galaxies all with 100 billion stars in each. There is Andromeda, the Virgo cluster of galaxies, Pegasus, Fornax, The Megellanic Cloud, M-33, the Coma, Cluster, Sculptor, the Hercules Cluster and the Milky Way.

*Five billion years ago, the Sun appears in the Orion Spiral Arm of the Milky Way. Four and a half billion years ago, the planets break off from the Sun, Earth appears and then Atmosphere. The prokaryotic cell appears four billion years ago; this is the first appearance of life. Then, photosynthesis, the continents stabilize, the First Ice Age 2.3 billion years ago. Homo Habilis 2.6 million years ago. Homo Erectus 1.5 million years ago. Archaic Homo Sapiens 200,000 years ago. Modern Homo Sapiens 40,000 years ago. Humans in the Americas 32,000 years ago. And from there, we trace recorded human history.*

Fundamental to our understanding of how we fit into the scheme of things, is the acceptance and embracement of evolution as it was first described for us by Darwin and Wallace and a hundred years later, vastly elaborated by Teilhard de Chardin. The universe process, the self-organizing process is the evolutionary process. We derive from the universe process, as does the entire life community. When God set in motion the universe, not only was it created, but it was endowed with a self-organizing principle,

which is how universe itself creates. Perhaps the hardest thing to get our minds around is the fact that the original creative event included the creation of ongoing and unceasing creation. For it becomes ever more clear that the very fact the whole universe is in continuous motion, both in expanding and in its innermost structures, assures the fact it is in a continuous state of change . . . or simply stated, in a state of becoming something new—in a state of genesis and cosmogenesis. Nothing is the same this instant as it was the last instant. Once again, the Creator not only created the universe, but set in motion a system of self creation. The universe itself is continually changing into something new and so are humans and so is everything.

This is fully borne out by the fact that whereas there were only particles in the very beginning and they were hydrogen and helium, there are today over a hundred elements and their possible combinations are infinite. And there are millions and millions of different life forms. Aquinas says that God made innumerable forms of life since no one form could adequately express God's goodness, it took many and diverse life forms to do so. A characteristic of the creative drive of the universe and of the divine is that extravagance of the principle of diversity. It is not enough that there be several kinds of birds, there must be thousands and thousands of kinds of birds and so it is with all the expressions of life.

We haven't known these things for very long. Darwin's work was done in the first half of the nineteenth century—Planck and Einstein and Heisenberg and Hubble did theirs in the first half of the twentieth. Hubble's discovery of the constantly expanding universe came in 1929 and was confirmed by Einstein's earlier work. It is this discovery that confirms us in our belief that the universe is a time-oriented, irreversible, non-repeatable, one-time event. It confirms us in believing that the human derives from and is intimately involved with the whole community of living things. And it seems to me that this is an awakening to something that feels right and gives comfort in the knowledge that we belong to the family of creatures.

It appears that all creatures praise creation in their own unique way and bring their own unique abilities and qualities to their own obligation to celebrate creation and the work of the Creator. One can hardly believe that the universe would be created unless there was going to be an audience to honor it, an audience capable of being awestruck, capable of appreciating the magnificence of it. And that is what humans are for. We are able to

understand why Creation should be honored and therefore we must honor Creation. This is a duty in religion. This is a duty the secular wing of the environmental movement cannot fulfill.

So this is our new story. It rests on the beliefs that we are Earth creatures, products of the universe process and the Earth process. We belong to the community of living things. And our story rests on the belief that we have an obligation to contribute human talents and human work not to the failure, as we are doing, but to the success of the Earth and the universe and to find our fulfillment and our joy in activities which make Earth and universe successful, which make Creation successful . . . for God thinks Creation is very good and surely God will be displeased if Creation is dishonored. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

We think this new accounting of how things came to be and how we fit into the created order provides the basis for a story that will shape our emotional attitudes, provide us with life purpose and energize action. We believe it will consecrate suffering and integrate knowledge. We will awake in the morning and know where we are. We will answer the questions of our children. We will identify crime and punish transgressors. Everything will be taken care of because the story is there.

