

## LIVING COSMOLOGY

By Sheri Ritchlin

*The sacred journey of the universe is the personal journey of each individual.*

—Thomas Berry

When I was five, I remember asking my mother, “If God made the world, who made God?” We were visiting my grandparents, so she directed me to my grandfather, a minister-scholar who was vocationally constituted to answer such questions and generally acclaimed to have insight into mysterious topics. When I put it to him, he eyed me thoughtfully and said, “Go ask your mother.” My future of philosophic inquiry was sealed at that moment. I went on to such great questions as, “So where is the end of space and do you fall off there?”

At age 13, on my second visit, my grandfather invited me to borrow any book in his vast library. I was drawn to a small volume entitled *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* and I immediately fell in love with “The Cosmologists: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes” of chapter one. Their quest for the fundamental nature of reality resonated with my own early inquiries. I believe that is when I first thought of myself as a cosmologist.

Five years later, imagining that now the universe would open up its secrets to me, I entered college as a philosophy major. It didn’t. My first class was in logic: “If  $P$  then  $Q$ , not- $P$ , therefore, not- $Q$ .” What on earth did I care about  $P$  or  $Q$ ? What did that have to do with anything? I changed my major to literature and felt more affinity with James Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus, who as a boy wrote inside his geography book—Stephen Daedalus, Class of Elements, Clongowes Wood College, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe.” Stephen Daedalus was a cosmologist of sorts: He knew he lived in a universe. But my inner cosmologist went into retreat.

In the years that followed, I pursued my own studies in various areas, including the work of C.G. Jung. Jung set me on the road to personal transformation, as described by his associate Jolanda Jacobi in 1942:

Self-scrutiny and self-fulfillment are therefore . . . the absolute prerequisite for the assumption of any higher obligation, even of the obligation to lend the best possible form and the greatest

possible scope to the fulfilment of one's own individual life, *as nature always does*, though without the responsibility which is the divine burden of man.

Jung and the dream work he inspired were leading me forward in ways I understood only intuitively. At some level, we all carry within us the sense of a "higher obligation" but what is this "responsibility which is the divine burden of man" and how would that be fulfilled?

In the mid-1970s, two things came serendipitously into my life that would profoundly alter my view of things. The first was Laurens van der Post's *The Lost World of the Kalahari* and its sequel, *The Heart of the Hunter*. The second was my contact with the Kumeyaay Indians of San Diego County and northern Baja California, Mexico.

What was so remarkable to me about the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert was that a people living in a materially barren region could have such an abundantly rich inner world that included everything from the tiniest creature to the farthest star. Each thing was as important as the next, whether near or far, small or large. The cosmos was uniformly saturated with a sacred and life-giving spirit. In *The Heart of the Hunter*, van der Post tells of a Bushman mother holding her infant child up to the sky, calling upon a star to "take the little heart of her child and give him the heart of a star."

Before I encountered any living Kumeyaay Indians, I had read that as part of their traditional puberty rites, a sand painting was made as an image of the cosmos with the sun, moon, and Milky Way. The young boy mixed a ball of sage with his own saliva and spat it into the circle, symbolically taking up his place and his role, not just in his community, but in the cosmos. For the Hopi too, in a boy's initiation "he began to learn . . . that he was a member of an earthly family and tribal clan, and he was a citizen of the great universe, to which he owed a growing allegiance as his understanding developed." He would learn that the living body of the human and the living body of Earth were constructed in the same way, with an axis that ran through each. The human axis was the spinal column with several vibratory centers "which echoed the primordial sound of life throughout the universe or sounded a warning if anything went wrong." This rose to an opening in the top of his head through which he received life and could communicate with the Creator. His "higher obligation" was to keep open the door and to sing praises to the Creator. According to traditional Hopi myth, the world was destroyed three times because the people forgot this higher obliga-

tion and let the doors on top of their heads close so that they could no longer hear the Creator's voice—the voice of the cosmic imperative that mysteriously drives the universe forward. I thought of Adam walking and talking with God at the beginning; Noah, saved from the flood by Yahweh's instructions; the prophets of the Old Testament hearing His voice. Did Jesus come in part to repair that rift when the door closed? "Knock and it shall be opened unto you." "Not I but my Father in me [the Creator] does these things."

Later, I had an opportunity to visit a small group of Kumeyaay living in Baja California. Standing under the brilliantly clear skies in the high desert of Baja, I asked about their names for the constellations. The Milky Way was called *maiha tut*, "the backbone of God," and every constellation name began with the word *kwi*yup, which I later found meant star. The prefix *kwi* appeared in such words as "wise man," "teacher," and "truth," which suggested that *kwi* was an honorific. They revered the stars. Yet when I asked one local anthropologist what role the stars played in their lives his answer was, "None apparently. There's nothing in the literature on it."

That lack of imagination on the part of many anthropologists always disturbed me. One had only to stand under the vast glittering vault of their skies, keeping in mind that they had no TVs, books, or decorative homes to distract them, to know that this couldn't possibly be true. It was our own skies that were so markedly empty of meaning, resonance, and beauty, clouded over by pollutants and closed off by our elaborate artificial environments.

I don't recall when I first became interested in the *I Ching*, but I began to study it more seriously by auditing the classes of Professor Allan Anderson at San Diego State University. It was there that the universe began to open up its secrets through an entirely new language: the language of ancient Chinese sages, communicated through a teacher who made clear from the beginning that "this is not a class *about* anything. There is no 'abouting out'!" Our inner selves, our daily lives, were not to be left behind. In the *I Ching* I found language that reawakened the cosmologist in me. We are told that the original *I Ching* sage Fu Hsi

looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens; he looked downward and contemplated the patterns of the earth . . . He proceeded directly from himself and indirectly from objects. Thus he invented the eight trigrams in order to enter into connection with the virtues of the light of the gods.

In this passage Jung's prerequisite of self-inquiry and the inquiry into the nature of reality by the first Western cosmologists come together with Indigenous and Eastern sages as a single human project.

Yet the more I studied the I Ching with its Confucist Commentaries (the Ten Wings), the more questions it raised. I was sure that things were being lost in translation. The objective-subjective separation at the core of Western logic, rooted in the structure of Western languages based on the subject and object of a sentence, was essential to the development of Western science. By contrast, Chinese from ancient times was a language of images derived from nature, which represented the world quite differently. Certain passages of the commentaries suggested a hidden depth that I wanted to grasp; especially this one: "Greatness is the field of action of the sage."

In 1992, then age forty-eight, I began my studies in Chinese philosophy at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco with the express purpose of learning enough Chinese language to understand that sentence and other key ideas of the I Ching. Once again I was gifted with a sagely teacher, Dr. Yi Wu. On the first day of a class on the I Ching, Dr. Wu explained that "Wisdom is knowledge plus virtue. You study the I Ching to learn wisdom. Once you learn wisdom, you don't need the I Ching." The word for "virtue," *te*, is in the title of Lao Tzu's classic work *Tao Te Ching* or the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*. Here virtue is a cosmic quality that expresses itself in the human or, in the Hopi sense, that can vibrate through the human in resonance with the Way or the voice of God.

In a later class, Dr. Wu presented us with a diagram of Chinese philosophy as a triangular relationship between the Way of Heaven (*tao* or *t'ien tao*), principle (*li*), and practice. Here was an interactive cosmos to be lived! On the break, I went up to him to express my enthusiasm for this idea and to explain my interest in doing my dissertation on the cosmology of the I Ching. He listened patiently to my explanation and then replied, "But there is no cosmology in Chinese philosophy." It hit me right between the eyes with the preciseness of a Zen master's reply to his student. It afforded me a small but significant moment of enlightenment that I could not quite put into words.

After the break, Dr. Wu explained this further:

There is no "theory of the universe" in traditional Chinese philosophy. Western philosophy emphasizes cosmology and

metaphysics but does not connect them with people's lives. They are abstract ideas or forms. The word "cosmology," in this sense, cannot be applied to Chinese philosophy. As it says in the Ten Wings, there is a "learning beyond form." "That beyond form is Tao." The Way of Heaven is different from cosmology, which is concerned only with the outside or material order. The Confucian scholar C.C. Chang said, "The ant in the human's hand sees hairs as huge trees, but in the human's eye they are only hairs. The man in the park sees trees. What are they in God's eye?" How can we know the truth of the universe? Therefore Chinese philosophy avoids discussing directly what this reality is. The Chinese sage embodies nature; inside, inner nature and outside nature.

Two years later, Richard Tarnas launched a program called Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness at CIIS and Brian Swimme arrived as one of its professors. Brian's classes, following his book *The Universe Story* with Thomas Berry, took cosmology in a whole new direction for me. He echoed Allan Anderson's imperative: "See where philosophy comes alive for you in your life!" He showed us cosmology across many disciplines, from science to literature, from Einstein to Dante. He helped me discover what I was really looking for, in my own language, and defining "reality" in new ways. "The universe is a psychic and physical reality from the beginning. I don't try to build up a proof from science—particles to spirit—spirit was always there." A later comment, "Moral action becomes the increase of reality. It leads to expansion and deepening of being," echoed a statement by Confucius that "the human can enlarge the Tao."

In my classes with Yi Wu, I was able to look more deeply at the line that had perplexed me: "Greatness is the field of action of the sage." I now had the actual characters to consider.

可	大	則	賢	人	之	業
Able	great	then	worthy	person's	enterprise	virtuous

This literal translation into English tells us nothing. More illuminating are the characters for the human 人 and the character for great or greatness 大 that depicts the human

with arms spread wide, “to the fullest extent.” In another interpretation of the glyph, the human has penetrated the upper realm of Heaven.

The last character, 業, has been described as depicting a “big, flourishing tree.” What Richard Wilhelm translates as “the field of action” is also translated as “enterprise” or “profession.” In the context of the whole chapter, it is the entirety of the universe itself blossoming into articulated, defined existence through each individual developing his or her own nature as a tree grows from a seed to flourishing fullness. This is the enterprise, the “field of action,” the work of the sage. It suggests the higher obligation to lend the best possible form and the greatest possible scope to the fulfillment of one’s own individual life, as nature always does, from seed to flourishing tree.

By the end of my classes, the subject of my dissertation had expanded to include the work of Thomas Berry with my study of the I Ching as “The Return of the Sage: A New Cosmology Meets the Way of Heaven and Earth in the I Ching.” But it was not until several years later that I discovered that Thomas Berry had gone to China in 1948 and had read the same Chinese classics I had in the original language. Following a visit I made to Thomas in the last year of his life, Herman Greene gave me copies of Thomas’s Riverdale Papers on the exact themes that had drawn me in my I Ching studies. Here he writes on ch’eng, authenticity.

The basic obligation of humans is to perfect their nature. When this is accomplished we attain a complete interior spontaneity in our actions. That these actions accord with our nature, that they are spontaneous in the most profound sense of the word, that they are in harmony with all our social relationships, all this depends on the authentic character of our being.

Thomas had brought together for me the decades of study and personal work, from the five-year-old asking “cosmic questions” to the thirteen-year-old discovering the first Western cosmologists, to Jung’s self-inquiry and inner work that moved mysteriously toward a higher obligation and divine purpose. In Thomas’s words

Virtue brings the human into higher realms of being. . . . It brings about the intersection of the divine, cosmic and human planes of reality. It also establishes a person at the cosmic center. The resulting transforming of things is the expression of what

is deepest in the reality of things, for only by virtue of higher transformation do things achieve their real being, their authentic expression.

The great field of action of the Chinese sage was akin to the Great Work that Thomas called us to, that of reimagining and bringing forth a new relationship to Earth as the locus of divine action around us and through us. Following this mandate, we are all initiates, like the Kumeyaay and Hopi young men coming of age and taking up their responsibilities as members of family, community, and cosmos; attentive to the sacred, vibrating through them as the guide to their actions, and full of gratitude for the gifts of their Creator.

But nothing can touch the power of the actual embodiment of what otherwise are only well-intentioned words. The ultimate description of the concepts I was seeking to understand was a single human life, *fulfilled to its fullest extent* in all its prismatic display, in its words and in its silences, its omissions and commissions—something you had to see breathing in front of you, going about the *great enterprise*, the Great Work.

The living legacy of Thomas Berry is exactly this: the living person that Thomas was to every single person whom he met. So many have been transformed by the presence of the man in their lives; his humble and caring *listening*; his eagerness to identify in each person the particular gifts of their nature that could flourish as their own contribution to the Great Work.

While future generations will not have the privilege of Thomas Berry's presence, it lives on through the people he touched, the countless projects he inspired and now through *Thomas Berry: A Biography* by Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, who bring the man they knew alive through ten years of a meticulous gathering of details and stories.

Thomas embodied for us what I call “cosmality,” which results when the creative power of the universe rises through an individual nature—awakened through self-inquiry and honed through a devout and determined practice of moral action—to flare forth as a radiant life. The great field of action is the life itself, in communion with other lives, the living Earth, and what the *I Ching* calls the Great Harmony.

*Thomas Berry's life was one of constant movement forward, yet at every moment he was also communing with the deep presence in all reality. He never lost this sense of communion, and that is what allowed his vision to come alive.*

—Mary Evelyn Tucker  
John Grim, and Andrew Angyal