

A CREATION MYTH FOR OUR TIME

*Phil Cousineau**

In the spring of 1984, I co-led a literary tour around Ireland with poet Robert Bly. One day out in the wilds of Connemara, I was moved to hear him say that if your young people don't love where they live, they will burn your city down. If they do love it, they will honor and protect it. Love being the operative word.

Nearly forty years later, I believe this cautionary advice can be extended to young and old alike. If we don't love where we live, whether it's our neighborhood, our country, or our planet, we will burn it down, as in destroy it.

Unfortunately, at best most people merely tolerate where they live or live with resentment and suspicion. What too often goes missing, as the poets have long taught us, is the depth of love that leads to loyalty, connection, and devotion to those places we call home. I sense this in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Mary Oliver, the essays of Thoreau and Emerson, the scientific writings of Charles Darwin and Rachel Carson, the nature writings of Loren Eiseley and Robert McFarlane. Their sensibility is what I have long detected in the work of cosmologist Brian Swimme, and never more than in his new work, aptly titled *Cosmogenesis*.

I have known Brian since the early 90s when we were part of Rockefeller-funded "Think Tank" that explored *The Story of the Universe*, inspired by the work of Thomas Berry. The startling link in his work was love of place, an uncommon word, at best, in the realm of science. But the ancient Greeks, Irish, and many Indigenous peoples would have heard this as obvious. Love of place, from your neighborhood to our planet, is the beginning and the end point of our relationship with the universe.

In his invaluable *Cosmogenesis*, Swimme fulfills what the great poet-astronomer Rebecca Elson calls "our responsibility to awe." By this I don't think she was suggesting that we adopt a sentimental attitude towards the universe, but that we view the world with deep wonder. This was of course the starting point for the ancient Greek scientists and philosophers, the doorway to wisdom itself, and more, a wise way of leading our lives.

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What I admire about Swimme's comprehensive vision is that he deems awe and wonder to be the necessary attitudes toward the gift of life itself. Necessary, I might add, in the ancient Greek sense of Ananke, the goddess of Necessity, who personified the realization that some things are meant to be, or more, need to be.

In Swimme's reading, what needs to be is an understanding and respect for the 14-billion-year-old cosmological story of the unfolding of the universe. In turn he urges us to feel its cosmic significance in the marrow of our bones. I mean this not in the pop sense but in the ancient Greek sense of "order," and beyond that to pattern and a beautiful one at that. The stunning implication, in Swimme's vision, is that the universe came to know itself through us, the human race.

For me, this is far from abstract. Since reading *Cosmogogenesis*, the suggestion that we and the universe are implicated in one another, in David Bohm's sense of folded over, has changed the way I see my wife and son and our new dog, the cloud formations over the Golden Gate Bridge, the supernal glow of the Milky Way that I can see from our rooftop deck. I am looking at life, as Henry Miller put it, through the "Cosmological Eye" that looks back at me. And that has changed everything.

So, now I have an answer for my old friend, the historian of religions Huston Smith, who once asked, and not rhetorically, on stage at UCLA where we were lecturing together: "Why bother, Phil?" By that he meant why trouble ourselves with these overarching questions? Why dwell in the house of doubt?

Cosmogogenesis has helped me deal with that nettlesome question. This is an authentically mythic origin story, a testimony to the great and small profound beauties of the universe. Swimme writes that asking the deepest possible questions about the birth of the universe has helped him feel the glorious mysteries. That passage in the book reminded me of the evening I spent with a Berber drummer in the marketplace in Marrakesh who watched me watch him, dazzled, moved, grateful. At the end of his long session, he turned to me and asked in heavily accented English, "And you, kind sir, what is your way for feeling in the world?"

This is a question for the ages that goes beyond the necessity of thinking and cogitation, it goes deep into the soul like a Sam Cooke "H-m-m-m-m" and returns us to the wisdom of the ages. Or as one clever wag said, "If we don't know where we came from, we will never know where we are headed." Having recently returned from Greece where I led a mythology tour, "In the Footsteps of Odysseus," I can safely reply that we are headed "Home."

And so does Brian Swimme who has helped us look at the stars above and the Earth below as home in a way that could tectonically shift our thinking—and feeling—in this benighted time. With the mighty sweep of the oars of his vision, he takes us home again.