

AUTO-COSMOLOGY AND ME EDUCATION, ACTIVISM, AND THE HEALING ARTS

*Victor Lee Lewis**

To: Universe—Department of Brian Thomas Swimme
From: Universe—Department of Victor Lee Lewis
Re: Auto-Cosmology Project
Date: 13.7 Billion Earth Years from the Big Bang . . . So Far

I am thrilled that you thought of me when you learned that a journal editor was looking for writers to “comment/review/take-off from your book.” Having read through *Cosmogenesis* several times and being incited and inspired in new ways through each reading, I leaped before looking at the chance to deepen our conversation. I specifically thought that it would be good to write a review of *Cosmogenesis*. This is not that review. I think it is more of a handful of trailhead stories, influential teachers and writers, and images for my own auto-cosmological narrative. I feel so awkward about how “close to the bone” some of my thoughts are here that I don’t want to think about who else may read these reflections. I am writing them especially but not only to you.

The necessary starting point for my engagement with your story of the universe and your powerful inclusion of yourself as image, exemplar, creation, witness, and agent of the universe that formed and called you is speaking to the most important thing that I believe we share in common. I have taken to calling it “the cosmic sense of life.” I don’t know if you could have guessed how deep that feeling is in me, how long it has been there, and how and why it got there.

The cosmic sense, as I understand it, is a lived, visceral critique of life unexamined or lived in pitch battle with shadows on a cave wall. I don’t know how you were adopted by the universe, to be its own child, but somehow at some point it seems the passion to know “what is really going on” took hold of you and has never let go, to this day. I have been accused of aiming at “too broad” of a subject matter for all of my academic life, even by Matthew Fox, who was responsible for our first meeting. When I did my master’s

* Victor Lee Lewis, MA, is the Founder and Director of the [Radical Resilience Institute](#), and *Radical Resilience Coaching and Consulting*. He is a progressive life coach, trainer, speaker, and social justice educator. He is best known for *The Color of Fear*, a video about racism which received the 1995 Golden Apple Award for “Best Social Studies Documentary.” He has also worked to end sexism. He received his Master of Arts in Culture and Spirituality in 1987 from the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS) at Holy Names College in Oakland, California. He is a Neurolinguistic Programming Master (NLP) Practitioner, an NLP Health Practitioner, an EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques) Advanced Practitioner, an AAMET-certified EFT Trainer, a certified NLP hypnotherapist and a resilient and thriving trauma survivor.

thesis for ICCS, in Oakland, the title was *Dream and Cosmos: Exploration of the Personal, Social and Evolutionary Meaning of Dreams*. I was looking at dreams, psychological healing, and human liberation from social and “mind-forged” manacles.

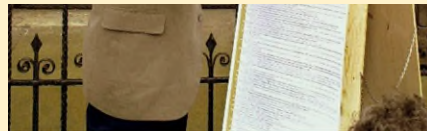
When you and I first met, I was midway through a seven-year deep dive into the biology, spirituality, and psychology of dreams within a critical theory/social liberation frame. My senior thesis was on these themes. I chose to deepen my exploration along these lines of thought when I met you and Matthew at ICCS in 1985. They were very exciting times, as this was the first place that I ever felt permission to say, “I have a feel for the whole universe. It haunts my days and nights. It has business with me in this life.”

Listening to your lectures in the back of the big auditorium classroom, pacing about with little Jeremy, my six-month-old son, pressed belly to belly in my Snugli pack, I was electrified. You kept coming on like a preacher, trying to “get a witness,” and during those lectures, I felt ignited by your still explosively youthful enthusiasm, enthusiasm which I had spent my entire life trying not to draw attention to in myself. When you would ask any of sixty different versions of, “Isn’t that aMAZING?!” I would want to shout hallelujah and run around the lecture hall, because when you spoke, I felt what my people call “The HOLY Ghost.” I felt the immanent power of God-with-us and amongst us. My cognitive-kinesthetic synesthesia, which allows me a steady flow of vivid sensations in the transmission of ideas, this sense of and for the truth was doing things in resonance with the New Cosmic Story that made sense of the entire world for me and took me back to a time in my childhood when the universe was opened up for me, and not a moment too soon. When I am thinking deeply about something and *feeling* the power of that thought, I have often found myself saying, “Brian looks the way I *feel* about the world. Besides myself, he’s the only person I know who is so visibly shaken by thoughts and ideas.” I remember feeling relieved that I could discharge my intensity by pacing in the back of the room with my baby, because I would have been a pacing fool with or without the baby. Your teaching and writing lit and lights my cosmological fire. This is what I think is what you hoped for. And so it was and is.

The roots of my excitement about your work are probably to be found in the early US space program. Because of it, I became a child of the universe, and not just of my mother and grandmother who raised me. I was seven years old. It was the first week of June 1965, the week of the Gemini 4 mission, the first multi-day US space mission. I had fallen ill with, as I remember it, two common childhood illnesses, chicken pox and the mumps. It was near the end of the school year, and I was stuck home in bed. A chronically neglected and regularly abused child, I spent the entire school/work day in bed, alone with only what I could read and what I could see on TV.



Matthew Fox nails a new “95 Thesis” on the church door in Wittenberg



What I saw on TV was humanity about to “touch the stars.” It seemed profoundly important. I thought it meant something really good about the values of our society for discovery and exploration that a space program even existed, and more importantly, it interrupted all the soap operas and cartoons on every TV station. I had no thoughts of the Cold War and that the “space race” as one of its leading battlefields. For all of its propaganda value, the view of Earth from the vantage point of the orbiting astronauts in the Gemini space capsule were my only source of real-time human contact. When I asked myself why you and your work are so important to me, it comes down to the rapture, the delight, and the ego-shattering awe that you embody in your live lectures. I have always had, since the Gemini 4 mission at least, a fierce passion for the wonder of it all.

As I watched the world-changing drama unfold on TV, wishing I could be with my grandmother, I remember feeling desperately lonely. I was bored by all the mission control hubbub and I was kind of bored by outer space, too. But there was something that didn't bore me—the “space-walk” of Ed White. I remember looking at what the Gemini camera revealed in space over the shoulder of the astronaut. It was a little thing, inconsequential in the moment. Over the shoulder of the astronaut, or from the window of the spaceship or wherever the video camera was mounted, I saw two things that detonated in my soul when they combined in my imagination: I saw the curvature of the Earth. From this grainy TV image of it, I intuited and dimly felt the spherical shape of our world. I also saw the blackness behind the curve of our round planet. I realized, in a way that I believe that maybe only astronauts, test pilots, and cosmologists do, that *Earth is in outer space!* The sense of there being such a place as “down to Earth” was shattered. Where I had once thought of the Earth as “here,” like, “here in the old neighborhood.” I thought the Earth was “contained” or held somehow or rested on a firm foundation. Nope. *The Earth is in outer space.* This recognition shook me to the core, although I didn't have the words for it at the time, I felt that this fact was “bigger than God.”

Looking over the shoulder of the astronaut Ed White at the section of round Earth behind him, I could see that he, we, and the whole world were surrounded by blackness on every side. I knew that the curvature of the world that I could see extended beyond what was visible to my eyes to a spinning globe I also understood that the blackness beyond the curve extended infinitely in all directions. I realized that “up” and “down” didn't really exist, except as relative terms. These are words we use for comfort and convention.

It was all too much for my young mind to bear. So after this brief detonation of my sense of place and identity, I dissociated and pushed the full power of the ontological imprint I'd received from my conscious awareness. It was always, *always* there though, Brian. My glimpse of our location in the cosmos, just our physical placement made me a child of the stars, for evermore.

I think I first decided that it was my destiny to become an astronaut during the Mercury space mission. I must have seen something about it on TV, although I don't remember anything about it beyond always admiring John Glenn, the first American astronaut to orbit Earth in the Friendship 7 Mercury mission. I had a birth mark on my thigh that I regarded as a sign that it was my destiny to become an astronaut. After the Gemini 4 mission I would forevermore be a “brother from another planet,” from a world

in a faraway place, hurtling through the immensities of a vast universe. I realized we were not living out our lives on a little “Truman Show” style soundstage, but rather we were living in the midst of immensities. I believe that this infusion of location data into my young body-mind-soul was a “protective factor” supporting my resilience in the face of another decade going forward of severe economic, physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse.

I might go so far as to say that the Gemini 4 mission mutated my consciousness. While I never set foot in a spaceship in the flesh, I managed to enter into deep trance identification with the astronauts and the Gemini 4 mission team, sustaining me in the midst of my boredom. A circuit in my brain-mind identified and located me as a cosmic entity, a cosmic presence, at the same time a child of the living, luminous Earth, and a child of the universe as a whole. For all my days since that mission, I have had a cosmic sense, which, along with most other matters precious or important, I mostly kept entirely to myself.

Thank you for inviting me into this conversation. Perhaps it is appropriate for you to think of yourself as a “public cosmologist,” one who does cosmology for our wisdom and survival that the Earth may live. If Cornel West is a public theologian/intellectual, you are a public cosmologist. Perhaps I will be too, that is if one can be a cosmologist yet not a scientist or mathematician. I think I can be, anyway.

I mentioned that I wanted to reconnect with that cosmic sense as it was first given to me. To this end, I jumped on my computer and looked up the Gemini 3 and Gemini 4 missions. I realized that it was definitely Gemini 4 that did it for me. I went to YouTube and found a video for “Ed White Gemini 4 Spacewalk,” or something close. It was colorized, enhanced, and reencoded for twenty-four frames-per-second playback. I thought viewing it again would be interesting, fun.

I have a tasty forty-three inch, 4k computer monitor, so the feeling was immersive. Seconds into the start of video playback, the second shattering detonation occurred. On the cusp of my sixty-fifth year I revisited an experience that was “too big” for me, only to find that it was still way too big. As a grown man, I have robust inner resources for coping with the onset of emotional overwhelm, so I didn’t dissociate. Instead, I sobbed. Hearing a voice in my head say, “I REMEMBER!” I clutched my heart—I remembered the static in the radio stream between the astronaut and Mission Control. I remembered the chatter. I remembered the soft curve of the Earth against the black immensity. I could feel the distance between Ed White’s soft animal body and the home planet. My soul filled in with intuition all the roundness of the world and all the black infinity around it. I felt the foolhardy daring and audacity of our whole primate species who sought this “overview” perspective. I didn’t just have one sobbing fit. Maybe fifteen or twenty of them so far. I have found myself staring at the International Space Station footage and other footage of the Earth from space. To see and feel where we are in the galactic neighborhood is too much.

I have been titrating this intensity by turning to art for emotional containment. The pop songs that riveted me as a cosmos-stricken child came back to me: *Aquarius* by the Fifth Dimension speaking to the meaning of cosmic activity for human life, declaring that “*peace will guide the planets and love will rule the stars.*” Listening to *Aquarius* gave me the feeling that humanity was a butterfly about to emerge from its chrysalis.

Woodstock boldly reminded us of the scientific record, “*we are stardust.*” David Bowie’s *Space Oddity* gave the human confrontation with cosmic immensity a personal face, “*for here am I floating in a tin can far above the moon . . . planet Earth is blue and there’s nothing I can do.*” Elton John’s *Rocket Man* and its exquisite official music video that mashes up space travel and the plight of the immigrant refugee. I listened to each of these songs on autoplay, sucking the marrow out of the slimmest cosmological reflection when I was a child. Over this past week, they have been reawakening me to my childhood recognition that planet Earth is way out there, in what we refer to as outer freaking space. If we realized we are space men and space women and space children from another green world, the same as ours except without the numbness—it is even called “Earth,” that exotic world teeming with life—it would change everything, wouldn’t it?

Hours of feeling pressed in hard, not by the playpen bubble of consumer culture and its “identities” but by everything, everywhere. I have spent most of my waking hours marveling at how deeply such a simple thing as a video of round Earth against black space could change *every single thing* for me, but it did. The “overview effect” experience is something that I have not ever spoken to anyone else about except you, mostly in our email exchanges. This rekindling of my exploration has changed me forever, already. I want to go farther. All the way, whatever that means. I am the universe reporting for duty, “Victor Lee Lewis department.”

My primary sources of knowledge at age seven were *National Geographic*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, and Marvel comic books. I also read *Mad* and *Sick* magazines for satire and social critique (they always critiqued the Viet Nam War and celebrated the civil rights and antiwar movements). I got regular doses of transdisciplinary knowledge about the world reading *NatGeo*, including biology, chemistry, physics, archeology, natural history, anthropology, and no doubt more. The articles were easy enough to read and the pictures and captions always clarified more complex issues. From Marvel comics I was able to gather into my cosmic sense of life that Earth, the Solar System, and the Milky Way galaxy are all events in spacetime, they have a history, a beginning, middle, and end. I gathered that life on Earth is evolving and that life on other planets is likely evolving as well, perhaps in other galaxies. I learned that human beings may not be the strongest, the smartest, or most righteous beings in the universe. I learned that one can be commissioned by the universe itself, mutated to serve a purpose beyond one’s own conscious design.

I had to feed my cosmological soul on comic books because my family and friends didn’t care about the nature of everything, how it all began, or what was really going on. My mom didn’t care. Her abusive partner didn’t care. The nuns and school, and the priest celebrating the Latin Mass—they didn’t really seem to care either. It was painful to try to harmonize even as small a thing as the Earth-shaking revelation of our world as one “lost in space” and the Bible story picture books of Jesus loving the little children while Satan peers from behind a rock to corrupt their souls. Although I completely bought into Fall/Redemption spirituality as a way to make sense of suffering—people suffer due to sin—it did nothing to help me understand God or creation. The Bible stories with their temporal and geographic specificity, seemed completely not up to the task of explaining the world, the “what is really going on” of it.

I dwell here on my self-imposed silence: Having been kindled by my intuition of the Universe Story through the Gemini space program, I wanted to see, hear, and feel my scientific and religious revelations through the same sources. It sucked for me that religion and science both seemed to be committed to uncovering the truth, but seemingly would have nothing to do with each other. Ever since I was seven, I have had as my mission tearing down the firewall between science and religion. I wanted to be an astronaut, a scientist, and a prophet (Martin Luther King, Jr., was my role model). The pursuit of scientific truth, ontological truth, and moral truth have always seemed to be a single pursuit to me.

Much of my youth and young adulthood could be characterized as my attempt to work out the call of the cosmos upon my life. This took the form of a ravening hunger for knowledge that school could not contain or contend with. My hunger to understand “the world” in its objective and interior meaning dimensions led me to read *The World Book* encyclopedia in sixth grade. I now understand this as a juvenile cosmological pursuit. I assumed that *The World Book* was the book of general knowledge about the world, with which all the smartest people agreed. I was confused about the world and had a desperate hunger to understand it, so I read *The World Book*. I don’t remember much except for my habit of reading the biographies of all non-white persons who were granted entry in the encyclopedia, and ignoring the biographies of white people whose names didn’t ring a bell. I remember my cultural cherry-picking, and my thrill at recognizing patterns, mostly in nature, at different levels of scale. Why do atoms, the solar system, and the galaxy all seem to have a nucleus/satellite structure? Why do tornadoes look like water swirling down the bathtub drain? How do monarch butterflies who just flew fifty miles over Lake Erie know to take a rest stop in my front yard on my willow tree every single year? How do the starlings know to come there every year during their own seasonal migrations? I mention *The World Book* because reading it convinced me that the unity/harmony of knowledge—consilience—was a self-evident fact. The alphabetical ordering of essays and short entries in the encyclopedia (just like *National Geographic!*), place humanities, next to social science, next to natural science, next to history and biography, all with their own color plates. In reading *The World Book*, I laid the track for a relentlessly transdisciplinary approach to knowledge consumption/production/co-creation.

When I was fourteen, I discovered a book at my junior high school library on Zen philosophy by Alan Watts. My desire to find more titles that fed me like the Watts book led me to read the entire card catalog in the school library. I realize now that my desire to map the library was my sublimated desire to map the universe. My desire to know the shape and structure of the entire tree of knowledge, I now recognize as my attempt to work out a personal cosmology, an account of the world that makes it all fit together and make sense. I don’t know if it was the psychic mutation that was catalyzed by my childhood marination in the Gemini space mission, or something entirely different, but my passion for getting an outline of the entire tree of knowledge into my own body and mind through browsing in the library card catalog persisted. Between age fourteen and age twenty, I maintained a secret but passionate crush on the author, subject, and title cabinets of the public library card catalog. I would estimate that in those seven years I probably read between seventy-five thousand and one hundred thousand book

summaries in the catalog. During the school year, I would devote weekends to this pursuit; and during the summer, returning day after day, I could be found returning to complete a thorough reading of one drawer after another of cards lovingly annotated by typed or handwritten notes, by people who cared.

Among my fellow travelers in the society of cosmologists, three figures have been of critical importance to me in the development of my personal cosmology. The first person to my knowledge to speak on the impact of space exploration on human collective psychology was Buckminster Fuller. I found in a box of recently purchased books in the library of my high school, The Cleveland Urban Learning Community, his *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. In its opening pages I learned the words “*synergy*” and “*general systems theory*.” I also learned that it was possible to begin with the whole in consideration of anything, the whole of the universe, and then to reduce one’s scope and scale of consideration to the right size to include everything of importance but not leave anything out. I experienced this rapid zooming quality in Fuller’s thought, both in person and in his many books. It doesn’t seem impractical or unwieldy to include the universe in our problem-solving on a subsystem of the universe. Based on his example, I have always maintained confidence that, if we are willing to learn how and devote the effort to doing so, we can start at the maximum scale and scope of concern and zoom in elegantly and quickly.

Fuller was my guiding light until I stumbled upon *The Phenomenon of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin, who became the second scholarly figure in my cosmological initiation. I am proud to say that I didn’t learn about him in school. I was rummaging through a random box of discounted books when I happened upon this book. It seemed like a weighty and serious book, and it was only \$2.13, an amount I could afford. Having never heard of Teilhard de Chardin, I bought this book at the beginning of the summer right after my disappointing freshman year at Ohio University. A paperback copy was in the “discount box” at the not-so-grand opening of “Manifestations” metaphysical books. Bob, the proprietor, didn’t have most of his books yet. I was such a bookaholic that I made a point of befriending him immediately. Unfortunately, I only had \$2 and some change and couldn’t buy much. Rummaging through the discount box, I spied the blue cover of an aging paperback version of Teilhard’s classic. Out of idle curiosity I picked it up. He was a Jesuit and the founder of my revolutionary humanistic high school was a Jesuit. I figured this was a positive. I picked it up and read it for about ten minutes. I recognized it immediately for what it was, the first reconciliation of Christian “salvation history” and the scientific theory of evolution. As a lover of religious truth and of scientific truth, I felt in this work something was happening that hadn’t ever been done before. I took it home and devoted myself to it. It was the hardest book I had ever read up to that point. Even without work responsibilities and almost daily devoted reading, it took me all of a month to get all the way through it. By the end, I was enlightened by the theology of the noosphere.

My third guide was none other than the notorious Timothy Leary, one of the most unlikely but influential cosmological thinkers of the 20th century. My opinions on Dr. Tim and his work, outside the realm of psychedelics will have to wait. I would say that Buckminster Fuller, Teilhard de Chardin, Barbara Marx Hubbard, and Timothy Leary laid the foundations for my cosmological explorations. These are the people who

prepared me most for my eventual encounter with you, Thomas Berry, and Matthew Fox. All three of you are relentlessly big-picture thinkers.

My passion has always been for the resonant intersections between data bits of wisdom known only *within* a body of knowledge. I think I was made to cosmologize (to think cosmologically). Reading your book helped me to appreciate that art, mystical experience, science, and religious thought can inform a cosmology, but our cosmologies are bigger than any of these containers. Our cosmologies inform what we are able to see, feel, and imagine in our religious, scientific, and aesthetic experiences. With the publication of *Cosmogogenesis*, you granted permission for me to say what I didn't know I was denying myself to say, "Cosmology Matters." Certainly, all of your books, alone or with Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, or Mary Evelyn Tucker have made this point clearly. *Cosmogogenesis* is different precisely because of the auto-cosmological method. I believe this is what I was seeking in my master's thesis, and in my proposal for a dissertation I never finished.

In *Cosmogogenesis*, when you told the story of the universe, and as you told the story of the storyteller that the universe fashioned to tell the universe story, every part of me screamed "Yes! This! Is! It!" Concerning what "It" is, I am not completely sure. I can imagine an army of auto-cosmologists weaving the story of the universe into the story of the living world and this resulting in a conceptual revolution that can redeem the human presence and provide us with viable and regenerative pathways into the second century. You are a mathematical cosmologist, Matthew Fox is a gadfly theologian, and Thomas Berry is a cultural historian. I think of myself as a "scruffy, no-collar scholar." I am an educator in the classic tradition of humanistic education, in the spirit of John Holt, Paul Goodman, and A.S. Niell. My ethical and political sensibilities derive entirely from ecological radical feminism. I have been a school educator, social justice community educator, and a political activist/organizer. I think of all of this as a learning problem, a community learning problem, a species learning problem. It strikes me that my calling, in addition to telling my own version of the Universe Story is to articulate a *critical theory* that like the New Cosmic Story explains and diagnoses our malaise in non-ideological or post-ideological forms. Instead of dying together-yet-apart in our identitarian cul-de-sacs and ideological echo chambers, we can choose instead to reinvent and liberate the human to become a thoroughly regenerative presence in Earth Community.

Although I haven't worked out "all the math," I feel certain that the New Cosmology can inform education, mental health, and spirituality in a way that serves the transformation of the whole. The great Rev. James Lawson, the wisest human I have ever sat with apart from Thomas Berry, in a lecture I attended at the first James Lawson Nonviolence Institute, said something like, "Civil nonviolence is the leading edge of human evolution." What you, Thomas, and Matthew are doing for theology and philosophy and the dialogue between science and religion, I imagine I could contribute to somehow in the realm of education, activism, and the healing arts, especially as related to the many dimensions of violence and trauma in our current life conditions. Auto-cosmology could be an avenue for the dreaming Earth's awakening and self-transformation. I think that it is worth me acting as if this is true.

P.S. “The Personal is Cosmological”: I think that is appropriate for the auto-cosmologist movement to appropriate the feminist maxim that we can find the dynamics of our macro-politics in our micro-relations. The analogy is that we can find the dynamics of our macro-cosmic world in our micro-relations, AND that our cosmological frame informs and filters our view of Truman Show-level things.



Ed White. First American Spacewalker. Gemini 4. [NASA](#)