

WELCOME TO THE UNIVERSE!

*Paul Wright**

Reading Brian Swimme’s book *Cosmogenesis* resembles how I imagine it feels to ride a rocket into outer space. Liftoff happens slowly, but as the ship gains momentum, gravity recedes and the thrill of the journey takes over. My advice to readers: Be patient, then savor the sweet ride you’re about to experience.

Who among us hasn’t looked up at the night sky and wondered what it all means? These are the moments when we come face to face with the unavoidable fact that our grasp on day-to-day reality is tenuous at best. Tenuous, that is, if we fail to incorporate into it the fact that we are not just observers of some mind-blowingly distant spectacle, but actual participants in an unfolding that is closer to us than the tip of our nose. Yes, we are actually present in what we are beholding (and “beholding” is precisely the verb I intend). But there’s more: not only are we participants in what we see above our heads, we are actually an elemental part of it. Struggling to grasp this fundamental truth, I feel the notion of “relationship” shifting for me tectonically. Not bad for a book about the stars.

So as I delved into *Cosmogenesis*, it didn’t take long for those familiar juddering experiences of awe, in the presence of the *universe* and all of its ineffable *beauty*, to blossom in my head.¹ And that awe was the wave I surfed atop until the book came to an end.



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¹ Astronomer Rebecca Elson, using poetry, reflected on this in *Responsibility to Awe* (2001; repr. Manchester, UK: Carcanet Classics, 2018)

Settling into science books written by scientists themselves has become an enjoyable pastime of mine. What distinguishes my favorites among these scientist-authors is that they are unafraid to add their own personal questions to the narratives they weave. Among them, Alan Lightman comes to mind, Ursula Goodenough, Aldo Leopold, and Jane Goodall, too. I'm happy now to add Brian Swimme, who intertwines his experience of acquiring insights into the nature of the universe with his more memoir-like trajectory of self-discovery, to my mental list.

A trained mathematician seduced by physics and cosmology, Professor Swimme's efforts to plumb the mysteries of the universe reflect not just a burning academic curiosity to know how it "works," but a personal need to push his own ontological envelope in light of what he finds along the way. "In the search for a harmonious attitude towards life, it must never be forgotten that we ourselves are both actors and spectators in the drama of existence."² In the spirit of these words (spoken by Niels Bohr), Swimme brings to his journey an intensely open emotional and spiritual mindset.

Along the arc of human history, I would like to imagine humanity pausing—coming to a momentary but nonetheless complete stop—being astonished by the milestone discovery that the universe has been expanding since its inception with trillions of galaxies emerging ever since and this process continues. Even more so, to learn that our bodies contain the stuff of stars—ejecta from the ignition of those countless fiery furnaces across space—should inspire in us a moment of humility, a pause, a musical caesura, like an orchestra coming to rest, as if prompting us collectively to reorder our consciousness. That has certainly been the impact on me of learning this.

Among many memorable scenes in *Cosmogenesis*, Professor Swimme describes a conversation that takes place at an academic conference on mathematical cosmology. His interlocutor is none other than the theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson. Professor Swimme is eager to ask Dyson about the anthropic principle and Dyson's insight that the universe "must have known we (humans) were coming."³ In the midst of their back-and-forth, Dyson, wondering about the then recently discovered "coincidences" of evolution, suddenly remarks and asks,

² Niels Bohr, "On the Notions of Causality and Complementarity," *Dialectica* 2, nos. 3-4 (November 1948) : 318, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-8361.1948.tb00703.x>.

³ Dyson famously had observed, "The more I examine the universe and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known we were coming." Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 250.

The universe has evolved exquisitely enough to bring forth life; and life has evolved exquisitely enough to understand how it all happened. *That's* what needs explanation. . . . The universe in some sense must have known we were coming. In a scientific way, not just poetic conceit. The universe knew. Somehow. To dig into the situation and to determine exactly what it means to say "the universe knew" is our challenge. Is this what you're working on? (82).

Reading this, I had to remind myself to breathe. And to continue breathing. Dyson's observation is one of the book's pivot points for me, one that has taken up residence in my mind. Strangely, I wasn't shocked to hear that an intelligence lives in the universe. In fact, as with many other "discoveries" I find coming my way these days, my reaction is, "Of course." It's what has been surfacing for me after that initial response sinks in that remains an abiding challenge to digest and build upon.

I recall a similar response when I first encountered Thomas Berry (and Alfred North Whitehead, for that matter), which makes Professor Swimme's accounts of his conversations with Berry all the more thrilling. And the challenge to integrate them into my own consciousness all the more compelling. In fact, it's a challenge that sums up my sense of the book's greatest value: What we read we cannot unread. If our understanding of the universe is no accident, then what is our responsibility henceforward to that "communion of subjects" Thomas Berry calls the "universe," and to one another within that communion of subjects? I have come to accept that we are stewards of our own destiny, and the destiny of future generations. However, interpreting what that stewardship means is a work I feel I have barely begun.

To that end, Brian Swimme narrates the story of an experience I would wish for each of us. It reminds me of lines by Rebecca Elson, the astronomer-poet who died in 1999, lines I first ran across as the world was slipping into COVID and have often since wondered about: "Sometimes as an antidote/to fear of death,/I eat the stars."⁴ With a diet like that, I would hope never to lose my appetite!

Go back, once more, to that night-sky awe, and with hungry eyes take in deeply the expansive beauty you see spread across the sky. Like the single drop of water rejoining the ocean, in such moments the universe reminds us of the all-encompassing law of interconnection—that everything "out there" is one with everything "in here," and that we are a part of the infinite All. Thank you, Brian Swimme for showing us how that door opened to you. Perhaps we can try turning the knob ourselves.

⁴ Rebecca Elson, "Antidotes to Fear of Death," *A Responsibility to Awe*, 62.