

# Reflections on Nature and Spirituality

By Alexander Peck

In this article, I reflect on my own life and worldview. Particularly included are how I regard nature and how this view has developed. Finally, I link my reflections to my faith and a new unfolding spirituality in my life.

## Reflections on Early Life

Looking up at the starry night sky from our home in rural Australia as a young person, I thought that the moon, planets, and sun moved in circular orbits around the earth.<sup>1</sup> In my late teens, deeper questions arose:<sup>2</sup> Where did the universe come from? Did the universe have a beginning? What lay beyond the sphere of stars?<sup>3</sup> At that time, I was also pursuing all science subjects in high school – pure maths, calculus and applied maths, physics, and chemistry. As a result, I was well versed in “the logic of scientific rationality”<sup>4</sup> and the scientific method of inquiry. I had a mistrust of anything involved with mysticism.

During the childhood years, however, my parents encouraged my attending Sunday school at a local church. This helped to shape a Christian cosmology in my adolescent and young

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hawking, “Our Picture of the Universe”, in *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 2. This was not unlike Aristotle’s view of the sun, moon, planets, and stars moving in circular orbits around the earth.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1. Hawking lists a number longstanding questions posed by humanity: What do we know about the universe, and how do we know it? Where did the universe come from, and where is it going? Did the universe have a beginning, and if so, what happened before then? What is the nature of time, and will it ever come to an end?

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 3. This question reminds one of Ptolemy in the second century A.D. who postulated an outermost sphere consisted of the stars – what lay beyond the stars was never made clear and was not part of humankind’s observable universe.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Davies, “The Mystery at the End of the Universe”, in *The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 223. Davies uses this phrase in his article.

adult years. For a time, I accepted the date of about 5000 B.C. for the creation of the universe, based on the book of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> Also, I regarded the universe as unchanging, imagining that God had created it at some time in the past.<sup>6</sup> Finally, as a Christian, I could not embrace *both* the theological teachings of Genesis *and* the theory of evolution.<sup>7</sup> I was simply not ready to rethink my theology of the Trinitarian God at work in creation.<sup>8</sup>

### **An Expanded Worldview**

Through the grace of God, soon after three years of teacher training in Australia, I had the privilege of living and working in the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. This has inevitably contributed to a broader worldview, including a willingness to consider interdenominational and interfaith perspectives. Today, I have a vision to pursue and present what may be termed an *integrated spirituality*. I find that by becoming aware of other people's spiritual paths – such as Buddhism, Cabalism, Hinduism or Sufism – my own Christian faith tradition has been enriched with enlightened awareness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hawking, "Our Picture of the Universe", 7. This view that the universe is about 7,000 years old is not unlike St. Augustine's view, presented in his book, *The City of God*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9. Hawking writes about the implication when viewing the universe as unchanging – "in an unchanging universe a beginning in time is something that has to be imposed by some being outside the universe; there is no physical necessity for a beginning."

<sup>7</sup> Denis Edwards, "Introduction: Evolution and God", in *The God of Evolution* (New Jersey: Paulist, 1999), 13. Denis Edwards, a theologian with an interest in evolutionary theory, compares the biblical and evolutionary accounts of the origin of life. He affirms that "there is every reason for a Christian of today to embrace both the theological teachings of Genesis and the theory of evolution. But holding together the Christian view of God and the insights of evolutionary science does demand a rethinking of our theology of the trinitarian God at work in creation."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Brandt, *Self and Environment* (London and Berkhamsted: Medio Media and Arthur James, 1997), 27. This reminds me of Brandt who wrote that he "had to go to the East to learn how to enter into communion and harmony with the earth community." Charles Brandt was trained as an ornithologist and environmentalist before being ordained as a hermit monk in British Columbia. In his work, *Self and Environment* (1997), he leads readers in a retreat to a fuller sense of the sacredness of creation and our oneness with nature. (Interestingly, both Thomas Merton and John Main also spent time in the East.)

Through an integrated approach toward spirituality, I have also come to recognize the limits of science and believe that there is an essence beyond rationality. I concur with Davies who states that “in the end, a rational explanation for the world in the sense of a closed and complete system of logical truths is almost certainly impossible.”<sup>10</sup> He then cautiously adds that “possibly the mystical path is a way to such an understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

In support of a mystical direction, in this case meditative practice, Selby<sup>12</sup> writes:

Imagine a spiritually (not materially) focused culture in which most of the brilliant minds of each new generation, for hundreds of generations, accepted as their primary occupation the challenge of observing, from the inside out, the inner workings of the human mind and body, spirit and soul. When we tap the ancient Hindu meditative tradition, we’re accessing the accumulated discoveries and wisdom of hundreds of thousands of brilliant and devout human beings who devoted their lives to looking inward, employing the tool of consciousness itself, and then sharing with each other and posterity what they discovered.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that one benefits greatly by developing an appreciation for the teachings of the great mystics, as well as the spiritual writers and teachers of our own time.<sup>14</sup> There is indeed a mysterious wisdom that seems to underlie all things.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Davies, “The Mystery at the End of the Universe”, 231.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-232. Mistrust of mysticism is understandable, given that it lies at the opposite end of the spectrum to rational thought – which is the basis of the scientific method (page 226).

<sup>12</sup> John Selby is a psychologist, writer, therapist and teacher who has spent his professional life studying meditation. After studying with a number of great living teachers, he then turned to an academic exploration of the psychological foundations of spirituality, studying psychology at Princeton and UC Berkeley, Comparative Religions and formal therapy, as well as carrying out mind research for various bodies including the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States.

<sup>13</sup> John Selby, *Seven Masters, One Path: Meditation Secrets from the World’s Greatest Teachers* (London: Rider, 2003), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Brandt, *Self and Environment*, 31. Great mystics included Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Spiritual writers and teachers of our own time include: Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, John Main, Thomas Keating, William Johnson, the Dalai Lama, Pascaline Coffe, Hugo Lasalle, Laurence Freeman, Simone Weil, Jean Vanier, and many others. Teachers who help us to understand the dream of the earth include: Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Frijof Capra, Jean Gibser, Teilhard de Chardin.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Brandt/23.

## A Changed View of Nature

In embracing the Protestant faith tradition, the following text, and other similar texts, shaped my view of the environment: “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and *subdue* it. *Rule over* the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (emphasis mine, Genesis 1:28).<sup>16</sup> Growing up on the continent of Australia – a land abundantly blessed with natural resources – I took nature for granted and thought that the vast realm of natural resources was available for exploitation and consumption.<sup>17</sup> One easily becomes entranced with an industrially driven consumer society, where human effort and achievement are the instruments for progress.<sup>18</sup> In addition, as McFague writes, one unwittingly enjoys and becomes addicted to the consumer lifestyle (marked by individualism and growth), and almost cheerfully stays in denial.<sup>19</sup>

However, as serious environmental concerns surfaced during this decade, I began to reflect on the role of humans within the web of life on earth.<sup>20</sup> Slowly, the insight that Berry shares, has dawned on me:

Much of our trouble during these past two centuries has been caused by our limited, our microphase, modes of thought. We centered ourselves on the individual, on

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 10. Rupert Sheldrake, “The Conquest of Nature and the Scientific Priesthood”, in *The Rebirth of Nature: New Science and the Revival of Animism* (London: Rider, 1993), 25. Sheldrake states how the text of Genesis 1:28, and similar texts, “are often taken to lie at the root of the environmental destruction wrought by modern industrial civilization.” However, the problem goes much deeper.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Berry, “The Ecological Age”, in *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra, 1990), 40.

Thomas Berry is a foremost Catholic figure in the development of a Catholic response to the ecological crisis.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Sallie McFague, “The Contemporary Economic Model and Worldview”, in *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 93, 81. McFague, a theologian, is concerned with the links between religion, science, and ecology. She discusses the rise and impact of market economics, the rise of individualism and the consumer, and the challenge of global justice.

<sup>20</sup> Berry, “The Ecological Age”, 36. Berry writes that “as we think our way through the difficulties of this late twentieth century, we find ourselves pondering the role of the human within the life systems of the earth.”

personal aggrandizement, on a competitive way of life, and on the nation, or the community of nations, as the guarantor of freedom to pursue these purposes. A sense of planet Earth never entered into our minds.<sup>21</sup>

With a sense of humility and shame, I found myself realizing that even so-called “primitive tribes” – such as the Australian aborigines – have had a larger vision of the universe, including our place and function within it.<sup>22</sup> As Berry notes, theirs “is a vision that extends to celestial regions of space, and to interior depths of the human being in a manner far exceeding the parameters of our own world of technological confinement.”<sup>23</sup> They felt themselves sustained by a cosmic presence beyond the superficial reality of the surrounding world.<sup>24</sup> (A table presented in the Appendix compares aboriginal and biblical accounts of creation.)

Consequently, I have moved away from thinking of the world as a machine – essentially an object (not a subject), dead (not alive), with all its components like the separate parts of a watch.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, I no longer see the universe as “soundless, colourless, tasteless, odourless, and of course lifeless.”<sup>26</sup>

Instead, I am beginning to recognize what the Greek philosophers had perceived – of nature as a living, intelligent organism.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the English word “animal” comes from *anima*, the Latin word for soul.<sup>28</sup> In the medieval universities and cathedral schools,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43-44. Berry further writes that “the *ecological* age, into which we are presently moving is an opposed, though complementary, age that succeeds the *technological* age (emphasis mine).”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, “The Contemporary Economic Model and Worldview”, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Sheldrake, “The Conquest of Nature and the Scientific Priesthood”, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 33.

the philosophy of nature was *animistic* – that is, all living creatures had souls.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, as Sheldrake explains, “the soul was not in the body, rather the body was in the soul, which permeated all parts of the body.”<sup>30</sup>

Today, further groundbreaking paradigms of understanding the universe are occurring.

One such pioneering and revolutionary concept has been formulated by renowned scientist,

Gerald L. Schroeder. He writes:

The truth of our universe is not as we perceive it, even with the aid of the most sophisticated particle accelerators and most powerful space telescope; that from the invisible realm of the quantum to the vast reaches of space, our universe may more closely resemble a thought than a thing . . . Mind, as information or wisdom, is present in every atom. Mind is ubiquitous in our universe, just as wisdom is the basis of all existence.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Wonder of Nature**

Between 1993 and 2000, my wife and I lived in the picturesque region of South Bohemia in the Czech Republic – an idyllic part of Central Europe. Our country home lay in a village nestling in a landscape where vast forests, fields, and meadows were interspersed with sparkling large and small fishponds. We took countless walks, experiencing the stillness and silence of forest paths in autumn and winter, contrasted with birds singing and chirping in the spring and summer. Mushrooms and wild berries grew in abundance in the forests. Deer would sometimes cross our paths. Hares, squirrels, and pheasants, as well as eagles, storks, herons, ducks, swans, and geese were all common.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald L. Schroeder, *God According to God: A Scientist Discovers We've Been Wrong About God All Along* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 220, 226. Schroeder earned his Ph.D. in physics and the earth sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An applied theologian, he currently teaches at the College of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. One can visit the author online at [www.geraldschroeder.com](http://www.geraldschroeder.com)

In reminiscing on this period – the countless hours spent in the peaceful countryside in the heart of South Bohemia – it now fosters a new and profound appreciation of creation.

Suddenly, the three basic tendencies or laws of the universe that Berry describes – differentiation, subjectivity, and communion – now make new sense.<sup>32</sup>

From *differentiation*, I realize the uniqueness of individual entities – no two drops of water, no two pine needles are the same; this reaches its zenith in human beings.<sup>33</sup> Consequently:

When we turn to other beings of the natural world we are led to respect each being and to enter into communion with it. We come to learn respect for the individual, a greater regard for personal rights. Everything has rights. Trees have rights. Fish have rights. Instead of exploiting these individual rights we learn to respect them and enter into communion with each differentiated being in the universe.<sup>34</sup>

From *subjectivity*, the inner spontaneity or interiority of each being, I recognize “that each being has a capacity to articulate its own inner structure, to declare itself to the entire universe, to be present to the whole universe.”<sup>35</sup> I need to be more sensitive in order to listen to every other being – to the countless voices of earth – to detect this articulation.<sup>36</sup>

From *communion*, I now appreciate how each being bonds with every other reality in the universe.<sup>37</sup> As Brandt expresses, “the whole universe feels the presence of each atom,

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<sup>32</sup> Berry, “The Ecological Age”, 44-46.

<sup>33</sup> Brandt, *Self and Environment*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

since every atom affects every other atom, and all atoms affect the individual atom.”<sup>38</sup> It is astounding to realize that every atom in my body is affected by the most distant star.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, with the relatively recent breakthroughs in physics, partly made possible by excellent new technologies,<sup>40</sup> our understanding of the universe and planet Earth is increasing. Today, I see the universe as a single multiform energetic unfolding of matter, mind, intelligence, and life – in other words, the universe as a whole is more like a developing being.<sup>41</sup>

### **A New Unfolding Spirituality**

In reflecting on my life’s journey, a new spirituality is emerging. Its features include the following insights.<sup>42</sup>

First, I am beginning to truly cherish and respect our earth – it is a precious one-time endowment (as far as we understand, the earth is all we have).<sup>43</sup> I have a responsibility toward its preservation. In the past, I held an escapist mentality – having little concern for environmental issues, thinking that Christians will go to “heaven” and so why be concerned about earth which will be destroyed by fire (see 2 Peter 3:7, 10-11).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Brandt writes that “we dance together in the great dance of energy”.

<sup>40</sup> Hawking, “Our Picture of the Universe”, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Brandt, *Self and Environment*, 32. Brandt acknowledges Brian Swimme in his description of the universe.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 46. I am indebted to Brandt for listing the areas of spirituality that I am personally experiencing, and expanding upon in my article.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Peter 3:7, 10-11 – “. . . the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment . . . the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives” (NIV, 2403).

Second, I am seeing more the unity of all beings. As a result, I am coming to understand the non-dualistic nature of reality, and that I need to move away from my dualistic approach toward life. Brandt captures this thought as follows:

Because the resurrected Christ is also the cosmic Christ, in touch and in relationship with every created being, we too enter (as we “put on the mind of Christ”) into a non-dualistic relationship of love with the entire human community and the community of the natural world. They become a single sacred non-dual community of love and sharing.<sup>45</sup>

In essence, this is what mystics are referring to when they speak of a sense of being at one with the universe or with God, or of glimpsing a holistic view of reality.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, I am learning to pay attention – to meditate. Practising a contemplative form of prayer, such as meditation, aids in moving away from a dualistic approach to reality and in overcoming one’s self-alienation from the Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

### **Concluding Thought**

Starting from a narrow and restricted perspective on life, my worldview has expanded unbelievably. The wonder and marvels of creation seen in nature have forever changed my view of the natural world. Finally, as a result, an exciting new spirituality is emerging in my life.

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<sup>45</sup> Brandt, *Self and Environment*, 48-49. He also writes that “to realize our unity with all beings, and so to leave the world of duality is perhaps the most important step we take towards halting the environmental destruction that is taking place on the earth and in the universe” (page 52).

<sup>46</sup> Davies, “The Mystery at the End of the Universe”, 226. Davies also states that “the central teaching of mysticism is this: Reality is One” (page 228) Also, “Eastern mystics emphasize the wholeness of existence and tend to identify themselves more closely with the presence” (page 227).

<sup>47</sup> Brandt, *Self and Environment*, 48.

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## Appendix

### A Comparison of Aboriginal and Biblical Accounts of Creation.

Aboriginal Creation Account	Biblical Creation Account
<p>1. The earth was formless and empty of life. The Creator Spirit shaped the land – its mountains, rivers, and trees. In some stories, the earth is covered with water or mud prior to creation. (The focus is on the transformation of a lifeless and empty earth into an ordered land and sea, filled with life – not creation out of nothing.)</p>	<p>1. Genesis 1:2 – the earth is formless and empty, but covered with water. Genesis 2:4 – the earth is depicted as a vast desert without life or form. (Similarly, the focus is on the transforming of an empty, lifeless earth into an ordered land and sea, filled with life – not <i>creatio ex nihilo</i>.)</p>
<p>2. From the beginning, the Creator Spirit has been, and still is, present deep within the land. This Spirit is always as close as the land.</p>	<p>2. Christians believe that God is present everywhere. (Many missionaries presented God as dwelling at a distance – living in heaven in splendid isolation.)</p>
<p>3. The one Creator Spirit is known by many names, including Yiirmbal, Wandjina, and Rainbow Spirit.</p>	<p>3. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is also variously depicted such as El Elyon, YHWH, and the Israelite Redeemer God.</p>
<p>4. The Creator Spirit filled the land with numerous life-forces and spiritual forces. The Creator Spirit causes these life-forces to emerge from the land and its waters as plants, animals, fish, and birds.</p>	<p>4. In the Genesis 1 imagery, all vegetation and animal life emerge from the land at the summons of God. This is consistent with the belief that life-forces are present within the land, and emerge at the impulse of the Creator Spirit.</p>
<p>5. The spirit in human beings comes from the Creator Spirit and returns to the Creator Spirit. The spirit of each person is sacred and belongs to the Creator Spirit.</p>	<p>5. Genesis 2 emphasises that the spirit of the human being is breath from the Creator and belongs to the Creator.</p>
<p>6. Human beings are entrusted with the responsibility to cooperate with the Creator Spirit to care for the land.</p>	<p>6. A similar sense of responsibility to serve and sustain the land is reflected in Genesis 2:15.</p>
<p>7. In the beginning, the Creator Spirit entrusted different lands to different peoples. To Aboriginal Australians, this Spirit entrusted the land of Australia and its waters.</p>	<p>7. Acts 17:26 – “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (NIV).</p>
<p>8. The Creator Spirit renews the land, and through the land teaches land-care to its custodians.</p>	<p>8. The Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 104:30 – “When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth” (NIV).</p>
<p>Source: Rainbow Spirit Elders, “Land and Culture”, in <i>Rainbow Spirit Theology</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 28-41. Written by a group of Aboriginal Christian elders, “Land and Culture” (chapter 3) discusses links between Aboriginal and biblical accounts of creation.</p>	